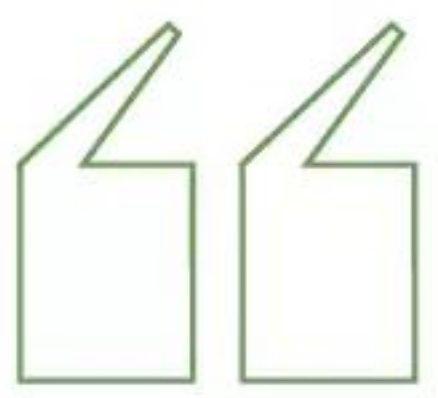


JAYLEN BROWN

Inside the Mind of an NBA Deep Thinker BY CHRIS MANNIX

Sports Illustrated

Photograph by
CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE



*I don't think basketball
is just about
being a star player.
It's also about
RESPONSIBILITY.*

PLUS

*Canelo Álvarez
Lindsey Vonn
Tony Dungy
Nneka Ogwumike*



ENSURE® MAX PROTEIN

DON'T GIVE UP DELICIOUS FLAVOR TO GET GOOD NUTRITION

5g —
PROTEIN

40g —
SUGARS

FROZEN MOCHA
DRINK WITH
WHIPPED CREAM¹

VS

ENSURE®
MAX PROTEIN
CAFÉ MOCHA*

— 30g
PROTEIN

— 1g
SUGAR

COMFORT
FIBER
BLEND
INCLUDING A
PREBIOTIC

Ensure Max Protein has a **30g protein blend** to feed muscles for up to 7 hours,
and is a good source of **25 vitamins & minerals**.

**SAVE \$4
INSTANTLY!**



Visit [Ensure.com/instantcoupon](https://www.ensure.com/instantcoupon)

AVAILABLE IN 7 DELICIOUS FLAVORS: Milk Chocolate,
French Vanilla, Creamy Strawberry, Creamy Peach, Cherry
Cheesecake, Milk Chocolate with Caffeine,* and Café Mocha*



Ensure
STRENGTH &
ENERGY

Use as part of a healthy diet.

Reference: 1. Nutrient data for 11-oz frozen mocha drink with whipped cream. FoodDataCentral. USDA website. <https://fdc.nal.usda.gov>. Accessed November 24, 2021.

* Milk Chocolate with Caffeine and Café Mocha flavors have 100mg of caffeine, as much as an 8-oz cup of coffee.

© 2024 Abbott 202316817(2)/January 2024 LITHO IN USA

Abbott
life. to the fullest.®

LINEUP

MARCH 2025 | VOLUME 136 | NO. 2

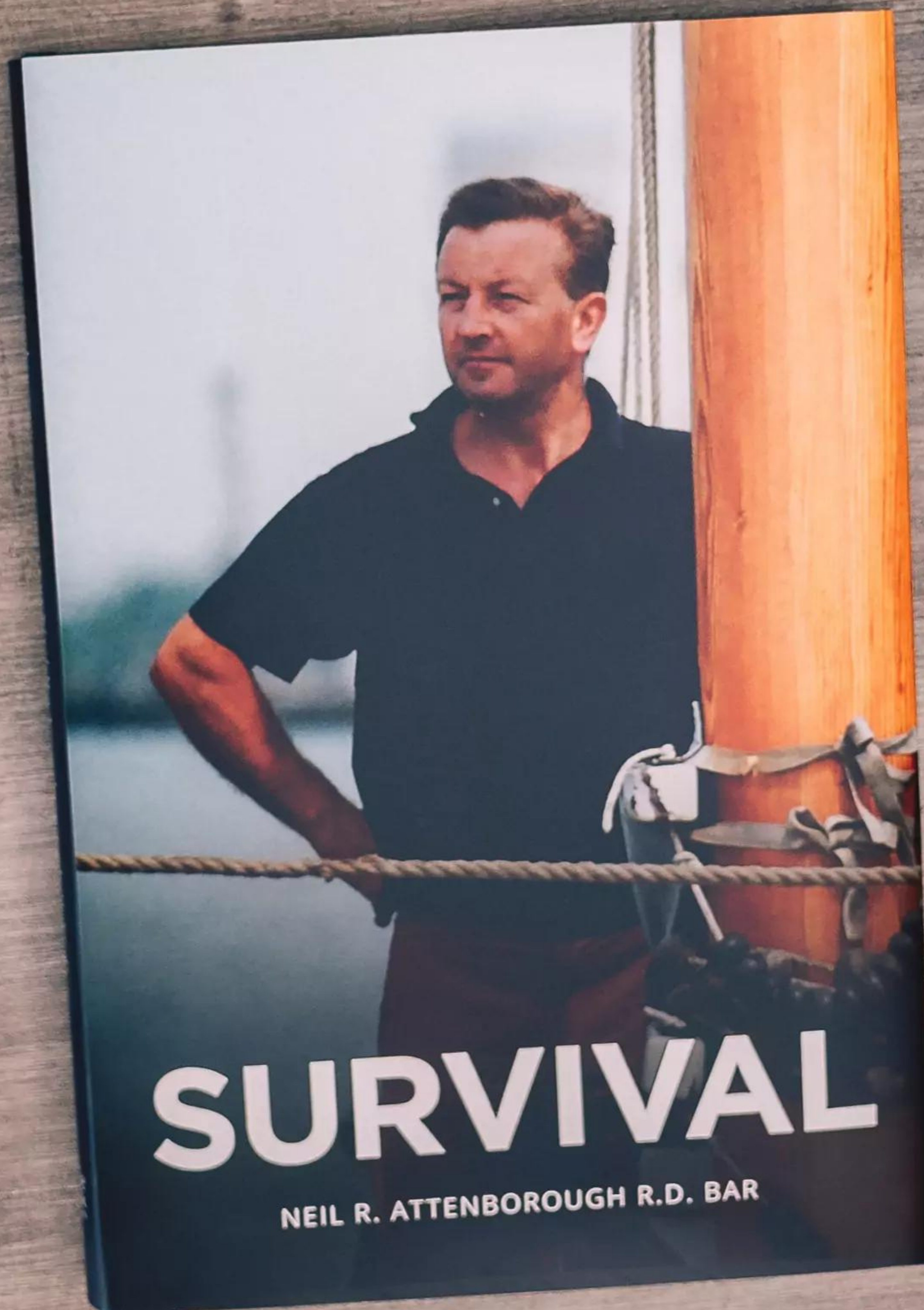
DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S LETTER **P. 5** SCORECARD **P. 6**
FACES IN THE CROWD **P. 18** POINT AFTER **P. 80**

DEEP THOUGHTS

*The NBA's first
\$300 million man,
Jaylen Brown
always plays by his
own rules.*

Life
Book
memoirs



What is *your* story?

Imagine holding a truly unique book in your hands. One that captures the most precious moments of your life or the life of a loved one.

Your first day at school. The thrill of your first job. The indescribable joy of becoming a parent. The experiences that have shaped you.

At LifeBook Memoirs, we do more than just preserve stories. We bring them vividly to life.

We take care of everything for you—you won't have to write a single word.

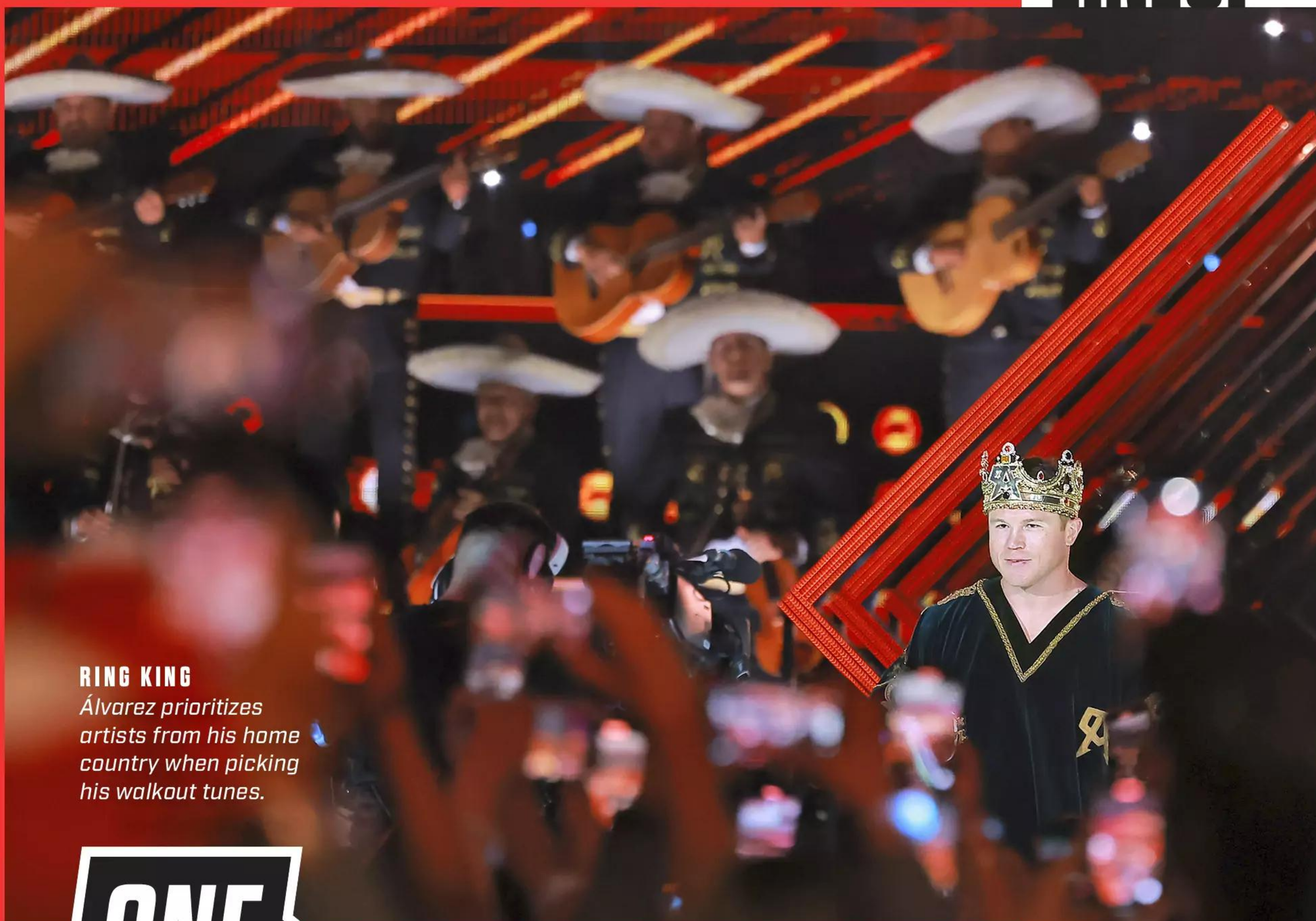
We will craft your memoir in your authentic voice and enrich it with your treasured photos.

A LifeBook isn't just a beautiful private memoir; it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience that creates a timeless family legacy for generations to come.

Start *your* LifeBook journey by calling 1-833-655-1579

www.lifebookmemoirs.com/sportsillustrated





RING KING

Álvarez prioritizes artists from his home country when picking his walkout tunes.

ONE

ONE

FEATURES

38

TONY DUNGY

The first Black coach to win a Super Bowl thinks NFL teams are being shortsighted
BY CONOR ORR

20

JAYLEN BROWN

The reigning NBA Finals MVP would like to redefine the role sports plays in society
BY CHRIS MANNIX

42

NNEKA OGWUMIKE

As her league soars, the head of the WNBA wants to make the moment last
BY EMMA BACCELLIERI

30

LINDSEY VONN

At the age of 40, the recently unretired skier has her sights set on the 2026 Olympics
BY GREG BISHOP

48

CANELO ÁLVAREZ

Uniting boxing and Mexican music has meant box-office gold for the champ
BY GILBERTO MANZANO

p.52 SUCKER SNEAK

The 49ers' anti-Tush Push is eerily effective
BY CONOR ORR

p.60 NFL OFFSEASON

The top 50 free agents
BY GILBERTO MANZANO AND MATT VERDERAME

p.68 NICKY CASS

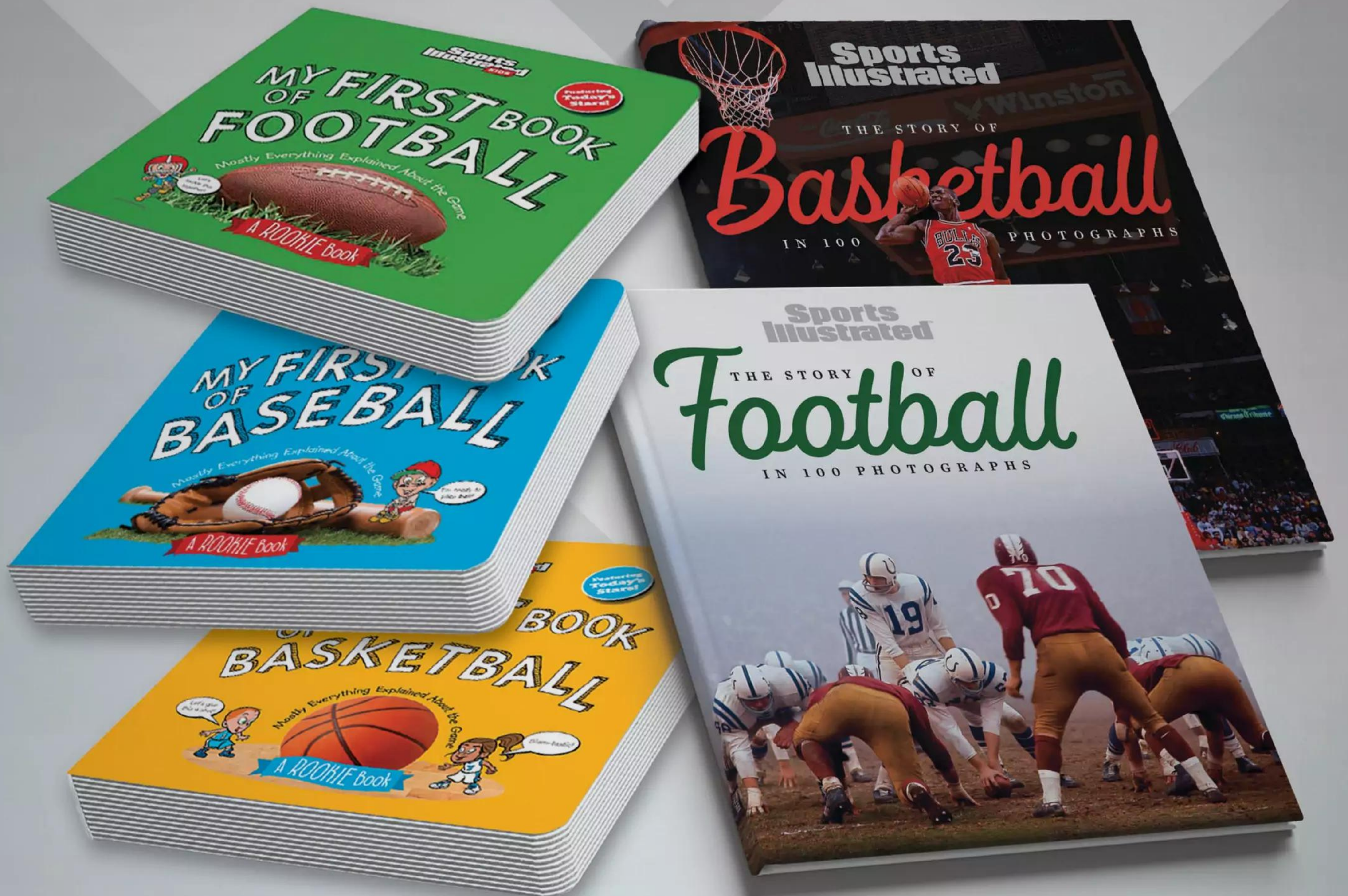
A former baseball player has a gift for comedy
BY JACK MCCALLUM

p.74 HEINZ KLUETMEIER

The photographer always captured the moment
BY L. JON WERTHEIM



SCORE BIG WITH THESE MUST-READS!



SCAN THE QR CODE TO GET YOUR COPY.



**Sports
Illustrated™**



SPORTS ILLUSTRATED™ is a trademark of ABG-SI LLC. © ABG-SI LLC.

EDITOR'S LETTER

ACCESS POINTS

► BY STEPHEN CANNELLA

I USED to be that if you were, say, a rabid fan of the Phillies *and* of home-made breakfast baked goods, you'd have a hard time indulging both passions at once. Anyone paying attention to Bryce Harper's TikTok knows that's no longer the case. The Philadelphia star has spent a lot of time this offseason posting videos from his kitchen, taking followers through, among other things, his iced vanilla latte recipe and a step-by-step guide to the perfect banana bread. Opposing fans who want to get personal this season can heckle Harper's strikeouts or his decision to add Greek yogurt to DIY bagel dough.

The point is: Sports figures have never been more accessible than they are today. Social media, television, the ever-expanding podcast universe... athletes have more opportunities than ever to showcase their personalities, their interests and their lives outside the lines. At the same time, those revelations are usually more broad than deep, doled out in sound bites and TikTok-sized glimpses behind the curtain. Revealing—but not overly so.

We built this issue around a simple idea: What if we engaged athletes in a deeper way—in thoughtful conversation rather than slickly edited posts? The result is the One on One package, which



POWER POSE

Brown was shot by photographer Clay Patrick McBride (top) for the cover in Boston on Jan. 16.

begins on page 20 and features extensive, unfiltered interviews with some of the sharpest, most interesting figures in sports. Cover subject Jaylen Brown, the Celtics' star and reigning NBA Finals MVP, goes deep on the role of sports in society, on challenges he has faced

in Boston and on his efforts to address the wealth disparities he sees there. WNBA star and players' union president Nneka Ogwumike reflects on the cultural and economic inflection point her league and its players face. Lindsey Vonn explains what inspired her to return to skiing at age 40. (Spoiler alert: It's the 2026 Olympics.) Boxing champion Canelo Álvarez expands on why Mexican culture and its music feature so prominently on his fight nights.

It's refreshing to listen to these athletes at something deeper than an algorithmic level. A conversation can be revealing—or it can be paradigm shifting, which is the spirit behind another feature in this issue. For Sports reIllustrated, a special advertising section that begins after page 51, SI partnered with Dove to tell the stories of 10 young athletes who are changing the conversation around girls and sports. Studies show that girls are far more likely than boys to drop out of sports by their teen years. This diverse group of athletes is a reminder that regardless of background, body type or challenge faced, young girls should continue to participate and use sports to build confidence, heart and determination that will last a lifetime.

There's depth everywhere you look in this issue, whether it's the hilarious Nick Cassano taking us inside his social media content machine (page 68) or a tribute to iconic SI photographer Heinz Kluetmeier (page 74), a master at capturing those magical moments that only sports can produce. The enduring images Kluetmeier leaves behind are the product of his devotion to both the art and science of photography. It was, you might say, the perfect recipe. □

SCORECARD



ESSAY

Brave New World

THE PANDEMIC SHOWED THAT SPORTS HAD TO—AND COULD—ADAPT, WHICH IS WHY THE NFL NOW OWNS CHRISTMAS

► BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG
► ILLUSTRATIONS BY MADISON KETCHAM

FIVE YEARS ago this month, then Jazz center Rudy Gobert playfully (we thought at the time) touched every microphone at a press conference, which led to every NBA head coach taking off his clothes.

There were steps in between, of course, the first few at a distance of at least six feet (or seven feet for Gobert, if social distancing recommendations were proportional to height). A half decade ago, COVID-19 shut down the sports world, a process that began two days after that fateful presser, when Gobert became one of the first public figures to test positive for the virus. The reboot, like a software update, featured all sorts of new features, some of which can even be considered progress.

At the time, what stuck out about sports in 2020 was the emptiness: Stadiums with no fans, NBA and WNBA bubbles with no outsider contact, a collection of

events with no joy. But the pandemic's lasting impacts on sports were hard to forecast at the time.

Who knew, for instance, that the lingering sartorial development from the NBA bubble would not be the much-discussed social media messages on jerseys, but coaches' attire? Formal wear had been a status statement for head coaches at least since the 1980s, when the Pistons' Chuck "Daddy Rich" Daly apparently owned 100 blue suits and the Lakers' Pat Riley carefully cultivated his image by wearing Giorgio Armani, making him appear more like a corporate leader and less like a gym teacher.

In the bubble, coaches dressed like gym teachers and they apparently liked it, because that's what they do now. They voted in favor of all wearing Nike gear and the league approved. Every day in the NBA is now casual Friday, just one example of what COVID-19

taught us about the malleability of the sports universe.

The French Open moved from spring to fall, the NBA Finals were in October, the Masters was held in November, and the 2020 Olympics were held in 2021, though they were still called the 2020 Olympics, presumably because 2020 bribed the International Olympic Committee.

Generations of Americans had been taught that Saturday was for college football; Sunday was for the NFL; Christmas Day was for opening presents and watching the NBA; and cheeseburgers were not breakfast food. But COVID-19 killed our diets and jumbled our schedules, forcing us to consider the previously inconsiderable.

In 2016, Christmas was on a Sunday, and so the NFL held just two games that day. Regular-season games were almost always held on Sunday, Monday or Thursday, with the occasional Saturday thrown in late in the schedule. The NFL believed in order.

The 2024 slate featured two Friday games, 11 Saturday games (including the playoffs) and two Wednesday games, because Christmas was on Wednesday, and the NFL now sees that holiday as its own. Last year, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said, "COVID was a learning opportunity, I think it was the first time we played on a Wednesday." In a track she released in 2020, Taylor Swift sang, "If I just showed up at your party, would you have me?" Goodell's answer was yes—to Swift, eventually, but also to everybody else on the planet. The NFL now parties whenever people will show up.

Perhaps the most significant changes were only tangentially related to the virus. At the moment of Gobert's infamous mic hop, Cleveland's Major League Baseball team was at spring training,



preparing for its 106th consecutive season with an offensive nickname. In the greater Washington, D.C. area, the owner of the local NFL team, an unpleasant man named Daniel Snyder, had vowed earlier that he would “NEVER—you can use caps” change the name of the franchise he had so gleefully run into the ground.

Then COVID happened. Two months later, a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd. Discussions of systemic racism moved from classrooms to just about everywhere, and Americans finally started to distinguish between what had always been done and what was actually O.K.

Change—some of it, anyway—came at a stunning pace. A chorus of Mississippians demanded that the state remove a Confederate battle emblem from its flag, including

Mississippi State running back Kylin Hill, who declared he would not play football for the school again unless the flag changed. By the end of June, Mississippi legislators had voted to change the flag.

On July 13, under pressure from sponsors, Snyder begrudgingly discontinued the use of his team’s racist name. Around the same time, Cleveland’s baseball franchise announced it would “investigate” its own name; by the end of the year, the search for a new name was official. Now, MLB officially recognizes the Negro Leagues as “major leagues,” which means MLB counts Negro League stats as its own. The highest career batting average in major league history now officially belongs to Josh Gibson.

While a name was being chosen, we watched something called the Washington Football Team, which

was actually kind of cool in a subversive sort of way. That primed our sensibilities for the NHL’s Utah Hockey Club.

Some COVID-19 sports-related precautions seemed strange at the time and are hilarious in retrospect. This was an actual protocol for the 2020 baseball season: “When the ball is out of play, fielders are encouraged to retreat several steps away from the base runner.” But some of the changes stuck.

In an effort to ensure each team would have enough players to complete the 2020 season, MLB commissioner Rob Manfred announced that the designated hitter would be used in all games for the first time, and every half inning beyond the ninth would begin with a runner on second base. Both rules have since become permanent.

In 2020 the NFL also made

healthy-body-count adjustments by expanding the size of practice squads and allowing teams to activate an unlimited number of players off injured reserve. That caused a jersey-number shortage for some teams, which led, the next spring, to the loosening of the league's long-time stringent rules governing uniform numbers. Among the changes: Linebackers and cornerbacks could now wear single digits, which did not sit well with Florida resident Thomas Edward Patrick Brady Jr.,

who railed that the rule change was "dumb," "crazy," "a very challenging thing" and "a good advantage for the defense." In the first season after the rule change, Mr. Brady threw for 313 yards per game—the second-highest average of his career—for the Buccaneers.

Change is part of life, and just as remote work probably would have taken off eventually, some of the developments since COVID would have happened without a pandemic. MLB was already taking

measures to speed up the game. College sports were already inching toward a professional model. The NFL altered its extra point rule in 2015, so it probably did not need a discombobulated season to spur a change to its kickoff rules.

Caitlin Clark was always going to become a phenomenon, pro golfers have always liked money grabs, and Novak Djokovic would have ended up with the most career Grand Slam titles even if we never knew his view on vaccines. And though it didn't always seem like it at the time, spectator sports were always going to come back. They are, then as now, woven into American culture, even if some of the threads have moved. On the final Wednesday of 2024, LeBron James declared: "I love the NFL, but Christmas is our day." On the night before COVID-19, it was. But not anymore. □

IN THE BUBBLE, COACHES DRESSED LIKE GYM TEACHERS, WHICH IS WHAT THEY DO NOW.





SCORECARD: BASKETBALL

STRIKING DISTANCE

DOES THE NBA NEED TO CURTAIL THE INFLUENCE OF THE THREE-POINT SHOT?

► BY CHRIS MANNIX



N EARLY DECEMBER, an NBA video circulating online quickly went viral. The clip, a two-minute stretch of the fourth quarter of a nationally televised game between the Lakers and Suns, was basketball at its worst: nine possessions, nine threes, zero shots made. *Why don't you watch the NBA anymore?* read one caption. *THIS is why.*

Fans *are* watching, of course. The league's Christmas Day slate



MARK BLINCH/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

averaged 5.25 million viewers. For the Lakers' win over the Warriors, a renewal of a long-standing rivalry between LeBron James and Stephen Curry, the number was nearly eight million. A Jan. 8 showdown between Oklahoma City and Cleveland, not exactly traditional basketball hotbeds, averaged 1.87 million viewers, up 20% from a comparable window last season. And the NBA *did* just close a new media rights deal that will

bring in \$76 billion in over the next 11 seasons.

Still, there are concerns that the game isn't growing. "I think there's times where you watch the game and it looks beautiful," says Bucks coach Doc Rivers, "and then there's times where you watch the game and it looks awful." Former players bellyache that games have become glorified three-point contests. Indeed, three-point attempts have increased to

DEEP IMPACT

Last year Curry attempted 876 threes—70 more than the Warriors tried in the first four years after the shot was introduced in 1979.

never-before-seen levels. Boston is on pace to shatter the record for attempts per game this season, while five teams could finish with at least 40 attempts per game. In 2004–05, Phoenix led the NBA in three-point rate, with 28.9% of its shots coming from behind the arc. This season, Denver ranks at the bottom of the league—with nearly 35% of its attempts coming from three. "For the basketball purists out there," says Nuggets coach Michael Malone, "I'm sure it's not their ideal style of play."

The NBA pushes back that the proliferation of three-point attempts is a problem, arguing that talk of skyrocketing threes is overstated. Attempts are up but only slightly from the last three seasons. The bump in threes have come at the expense of midrange jump shots, which have ticked down. There is still a steady dose of shots taken at the rim. "I would not reduce it to a so-called three-point shooting issue," said NBA commissioner Adam Silver. "I think we look more holistically at the skill level on the floor, the diversity of offense, the fan reception to the game, all of the above."

Around the league, the issue isn't necessarily the three-point shot. "It's how those shots are created," says Pistons coach J.B. Bickerstaff. No one suggests the Celtics, with an offense built around ball movement, are hurting the game. "Penetrating, kicking, swinging, those types of things, that's pretty basketball," says Bickerstaff. The problem is the teams that don't create off-ball movement and use analytics to

STEP OUTSIDE

Rules changes have marginalized low-post players like Shaq while favoring long-range bombers.

justify a higher volume of threes. “Sometimes I think you see a lot of just individual one-on-one, off the bounce [stuff],” says Bickerstaff. “The ball doesn’t move. Everybody stands and watches.” Adds Rivers, “There’s teams that only jack shots up, don’t play defense. I don’t want to watch them.”

However it’s framed, there *is* a problem. Offenses, Silver admitted, can “look sort of cookie-cutter.” “What we’re hearing from fans, and that’s something we’re paying a lot of attention to, is that they want more diversity and style on the floor,” said Silver. Solutions, though, are not so obvious. Addressing a group of reporters recently, Silver sought some crowdsourcing. “I look forward to reading and listening to all of your views about what changes we should be making,” he said.

Well, Adam, since you asked...

• **Enforce current rules.** Coaches agree: There are rules on the books that, if enforced, will bring the game closer to the rim. Defensive three seconds, for example. Rules state that any defenders in the paint “must be actively guarding an opponent within three seconds,” a rule that is often not actively enforced. Seeing an extra defender in the paint can discourage offensive players from driving; seeing a clear lane can have the opposite effect. Having a help defender farther away would reduce the number of drive-and-kicks. “That’s probably at least two or three more times per game where guys are going to the rim instead of shooting threes,” says a veteran assistant coach.



There are other rules that are being largely ignored. Referees can be more diligent about calling illegal screens, which often spring three-point shooters. They can call more traveling when a player switches his pivot foot coming off those screens. “We don’t need sweeping changes,” says the assistant. “Just enforce the rules we already have.”

• **Bring back hand checking.** In 2004, the NBA, desperate to juice offenses, cracked down on hand

it will level the playing field. And perhaps encourage more diverse play calling.

“I do miss the days of a low-post presence,” says Bickerstaff. “A guy who you throw the ball to, you force a double team, and how they rotate and then you get your threes. To me, that’s kind of the Patrick Ewing’s, the Hakeem Olajuwon’s [offense] that I grew up watching.”

• **A hard cap on made threes.** “If I thought there was a Golden At Bat,

But if you want to reduce the number of threes, limit the number of makes that count.

• **Expand the three-point line.**

In 1994, in an early attempt to increase scoring, the league moved the three-point line in 21 inches. The game, then NBA vice president Rod Thorn said, was trending toward becoming a “grappling match.” The move backfired. While three-point attempts went up, scoring didn’t meaningfully increase, leading the league to

“IF I THOUGHT THERE WAS A GOLDEN AT BAT, SORT OF A QUICK FIX, I’D PUT IT ON THE TABLE,” SAID SILVER. MAYBE THERE IS: CAPPING THREES.



and forearm checking, specifically on the perimeter, where players had been allowed to maintain contact with opposing ballhandlers. The result was an immediate spike in scoring that launched a new offense-oriented era.

Time to turn back the clock. Allowing hand checking, and more physicality beyond the three-point line in general, will push the game back inside the arc. It won’t lead to a return to the days of two-figure scoring—three-point shooters in 2025 are far more skilled than those in, say, 1995—but

sort of a quick fix,” said Silver, referencing a rule Major League Baseball has considered that would allow a team to send up any hitter once a game, “I’d put it on the table.” Maybe there is. Capping the number of made threes—call it 15 per game—would force teams to be more judicious with their attempts. Play inside the line early to preserve threes late. It’s a bit complicated and the NBA, which has caused plenty of confusion with the standings of its in-season tournament, is loath to introduce anything that creates even more.

return the three-point line to its original distance in 1997.

Would moving it back make a difference? The shortened three-point line didn’t stick partially because with less distance to travel to get to three-point shooters, defenders were able to clog the paint. More distance between the three-point line and the basket would (theoretically) create more room to operate while making the three-point shot more difficult. For some long-range specialists (Curry, Trae Young) it won’t matter. For others, it might. □

SCORECARD: NEWSMAKERS

THE BIG SWITCH

GENIE BOUCHARD'S MOVE FROM TENNIS TO PICKLEBALL MEANT STARTING FROM SCRATCH

► BY DAN FALKENHEIM

GENIE BOUCHARD needed her partner to pull his weight. About two months before her Pickleball Slam 3 doubles match against Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf for a \$1 million cash purse, Bouchard approached Andy Roddick's wife, Brooklyn Decker, at a charity tennis event in the Bahamas. "I was like, *Brooklyn, you gotta make him practice,*" Bouchard recalls. "She's like, *I'm trying.* And Andy's

like, *I am not practicing.* And I was like, *Dude, come on. I can't carry the team here.*"

As Bouchard has learned, the journey from the baseline to the kitchen line is harder than it appears. Bouchard, who rose to prominence in 2014 when she became the first Canadian-born player to reach a Grand Slam singles final at Wimbledon and peaked as No. 5 in the world later that year, joined the PPA Tour last

season. She embraced that circuit as her new competitive home, even if that meant starting from scratch.

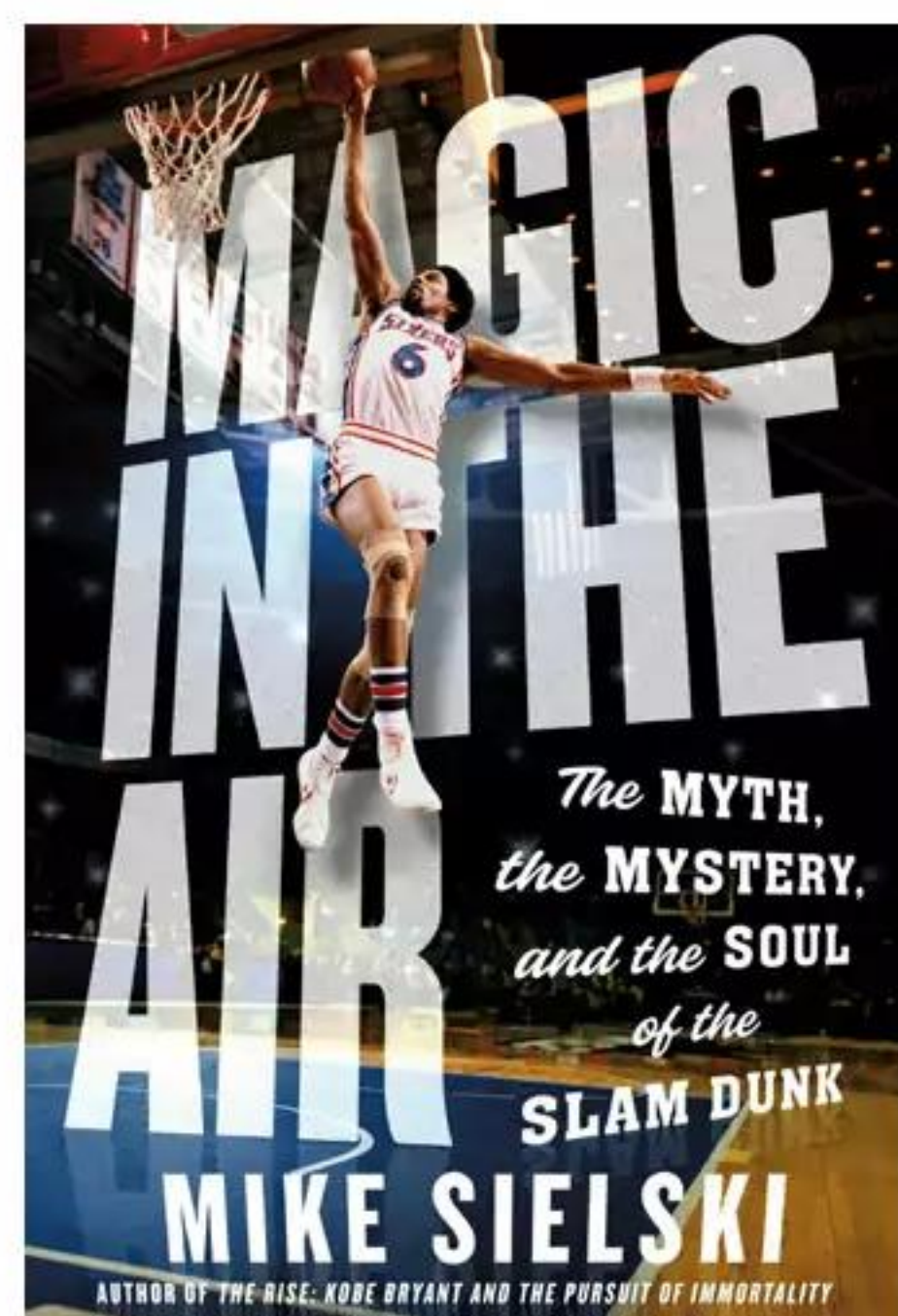
Which, at first, meant adjusting to a smaller racket and unlearning her tennis habits. Bouchard, 31, finding herself mid-rally, has instinctively hit a tennis shot, only to lose the point. In tennis, she had been taught for 25 years that playing a soft, short ball would get her in trouble; in pickleball, though, it's the opposite. A dink—a controlled shot designed to land in the kitchen—is weaponized as a strategic shot to create a difficult return.

"It's a totally different skill set," Bouchard says. "I went 0–9 in my first nine matches and I felt like the expectations from the outside were different than that. It's like living in a whole new world."

She's beginning to find her place. In October, she reached a women's singles semifinal for the first time, at the Las Vegas Open. Weeks later during a match, she executed an around the post, a shot hit from outside the sideline, around the net post and legally into play, and landed on

GAMEPLAN

READ



MAGIC IN THE AIR

BY MIKE SIELSKI

Yes, basketball has changed radically in the past quarter century, as you [hopefully] just read. But the game's increasing dependence on the three-pointer isn't

nearly as big a seismic shift as the one that occurred between the inception of the NBA and the moment in 1976 when Julius Erving took off from the free throw line in Denver and won the inaugural ABA

slam dunk contest.

In its early days, the NBA was dominated by guys shooting decidedly unsexy jump hooks and set shots. The dunk brought the game much needed panache.

In *Magic in the Air*, Mike Sielski traces the evolution of the shot as well as its wide-ranging influence not just on the sport, but on culture in general. He goes deep on the usual suspects—like



TAYA GRAY/THE DESERT SUN/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES

Erving and playground legend Earl “The Goat” Manigault—but also delves into the underlying truths behind *White Men Can’t Jump* as well as the impact the shot had on the women’s game.

Sielski’s last book was an

excellent look into what made Kobe Bryant become the Black Mamba. He has a gift for storytelling, and this tale is—much like a well-executed dunk—equal parts raucous, improvisational and powerful.

—Mark Bechtel

KIND OF A BIG DILL

Bouchard has cultivated a whole new skill set on the pickleball court, having climbed to No. 19 on the PPA Tour in 2024.

the *SportsCenter* Top 10. She closed 2024 by going 15–8 after her winless start and reached No. 19 on the PPA Tour.

For Bouchard, though, the benefits of her career swap aren’t as directly tied to wins, losses and rankings. She only entered one WTA Tour event in 2024—a decision made more difficult by the

fact that she considers tennis her first true love—but pickleball is easier on her body, and she enjoyed its lighter travel schedule. She’s had time to challenge herself and take on endeavors that make her feel more well-rounded, like her stint calling matches for the Tennis Channel over the summer. Even as she’s welcomed a different rhythm, Bouchard continues to push herself in new directions.

“Change is hard no matter what we’re talking about in life,” Bouchard says. “It’s easier to just keep doing the same thing than to change, right?” □

SI EVENTS

2

0

SPORTSPERSON

2

4

of the **YEAR**

Sports Illustrated

On Jan. 7 in Las Vegas, Sports Illustrated welcomed athletes and VIP guests to celebrate its 2024 Sportsperson of the Year award winners. In its 70th year, the Sportsperson franchise recognizes athletes and trailblazers who have redefined excellence in sports and culture. The 2024 honorees included Olympic gymnast Simone Biles (Sportsperson of the Year), Heisman Trophy winner and Colorado football player Travis Hunter (Breakout Star of the Year), late NBA Hall of Famer Dikembe Mutombo (Muhammad Ali Legacy Award) and NWSL commissioner Jessica Berman (Innovator of the Year).

Hosted by award-winning actor, writer and producer Keegan-Michael Key at Wynn Las Vegas's acclaimed XS Nightclub, the official home of Sportsperson 2024, the star-studded event brought together some of the very best in sports.

The presenting partner of Sportsperson, AFEELA—a new EV brand developed by Sony Honda Mobility Inc.—gave guests a sneak peek at its prototype vehicle. Hands-on demos were offered to attendees, proving a unique, up-close experience with the future of Mobility. Verizon, an official partner, kept attendees powered and connected throughout the event.



Honorees and award presenters (clockwise from top left): **LONNIE ALI, BISMACK BIYOMBO, GRANT HILL, TRAVIS HUNTER, SIMONE BILES, ALY RAISMAN** and **JESSICA BERMAN**



SI Swimsuit models **KATIE AUSTIN, CAMILLE KOSTEK** and **NICOLE WILLIAMS ENGLISH**



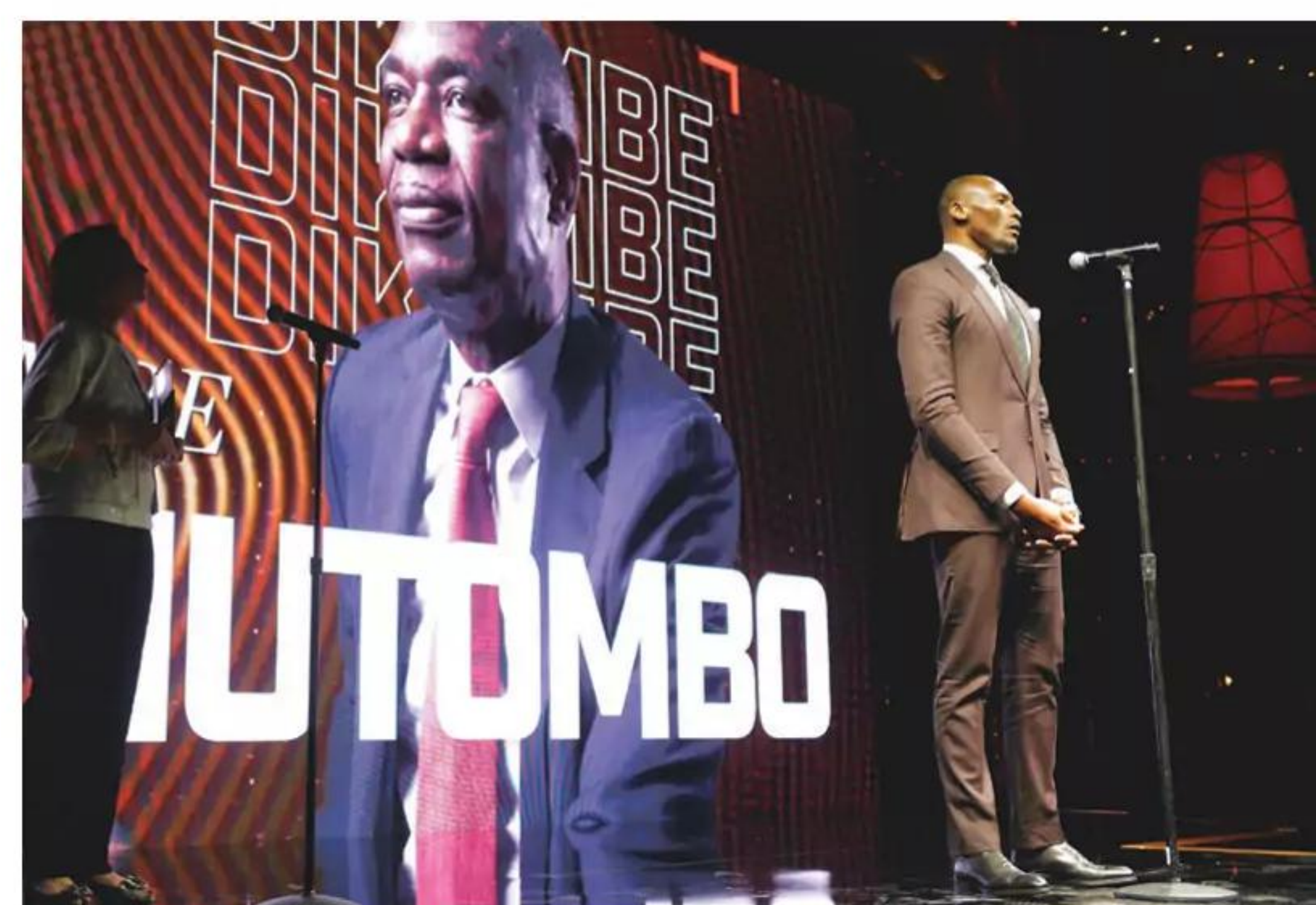
Breakout Star of the Year **TRAVIS HUNTER**



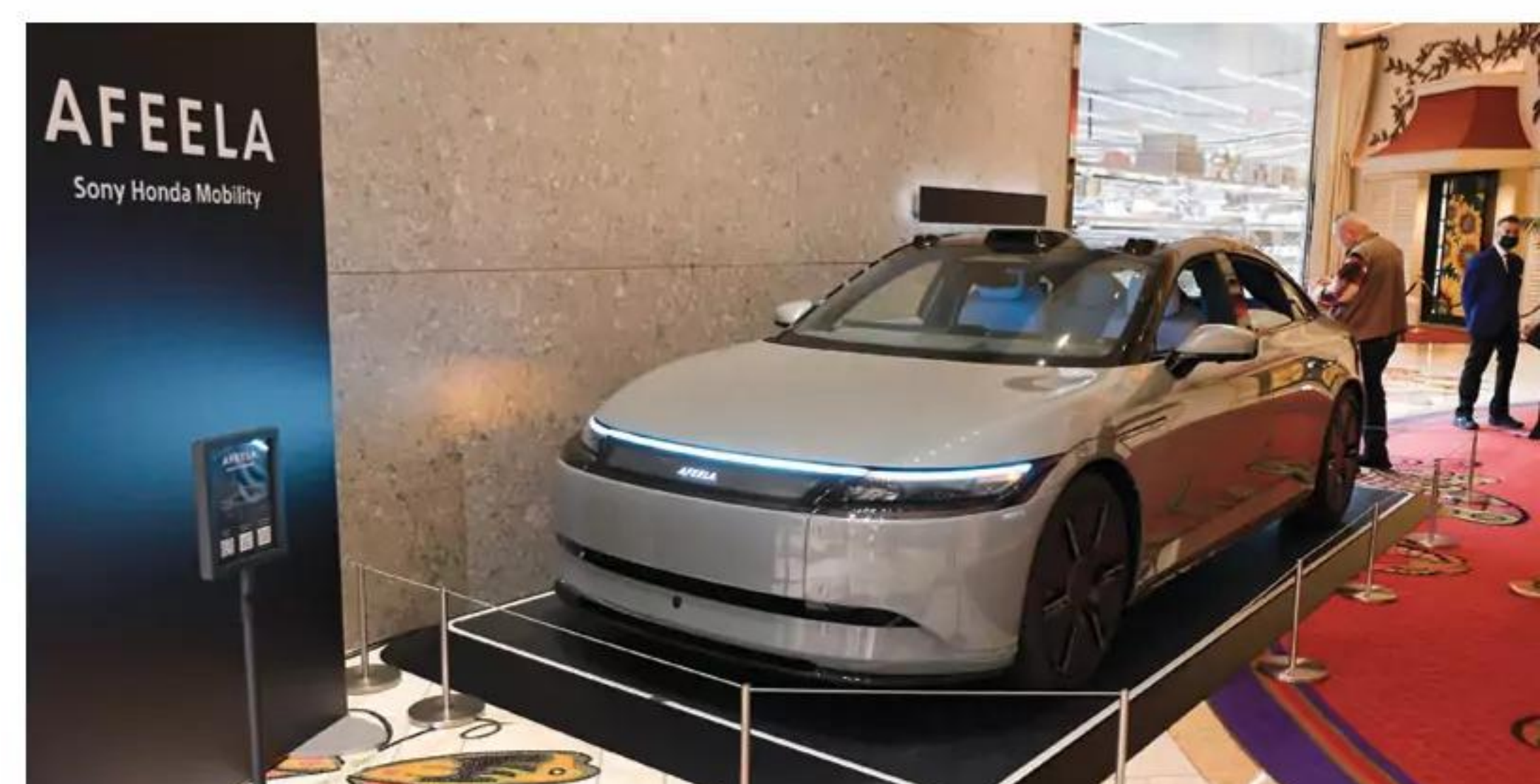
Sportsperson of the Year **SIMONE BILES** and **JONATHAN OWENS** hit the red carpet.



Olympic gymnasts **ALY RAISMAN** and **SIMONE BILES** share a laugh.



BISMACK BIYOMBO accepts the **MUHAMMAD ALI LEGACY AWARD** on behalf of **DIKEMBE MUTOMBO**.



AFEELA, the presenting partner of Sportsperson, showcased its new prototype vehicle.



Relax Like a Champion

Whether you're Sportsperson of the Year or a champion in your own world, we all need a little downtime. Join us at Wynn Las Vegas to recharge and rev up for life's next medal round.

Book now at [wynnlasvegas.com](https://www.wynnlasvegas.com)

Wynn
LAS VEGAS

FACES IN THE CROWD

► BY DAN FALKENHEIM

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email faces@si.com.



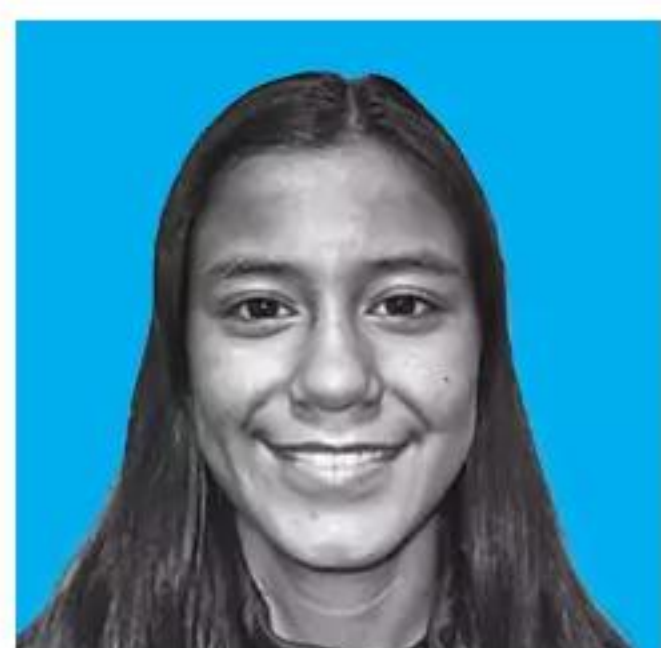
LUKE LEHEN ► Sport: Football ► Hometown: Chatham, Ill.

Lehen, a graduate student and quarterback at North Central College, threw for 298 yards and four touchdowns and rushed for 55 yards and one score in a 41–25 victory over Mount Union, tying the NCAA all-divisions career passing touchdowns record (162) as the Cardinals won the Division III title. He ended his career with all-divisions records in TDs responsible for (213) and passing efficiency (211.9).



TORI DEHRLEIN ► Sport: Basketball ► Hometown: Crosby, Minn.

Tori, a junior guard at Crosby-Ironton, had 30 points, 21 assists, 12 rebounds and 12 steals in a 113–33 defeat of Hinckley-Finlayson, breaking the girls’ state record for most assists in a single game. A Minnesota commit, she averaged 30.5 points, 16.2 rebounds, 10.1 assists and 7.9 steals per game with three quadruple doubles through 16 games this season.



LUPITA RUIZ ► Sport: Boxing ► Hometown: Garden Grove, Calif.

Lupita, a freshman at Santiago High, defeated Stockton’s Faith Gomez by a unanimous 5–0 decision, winning the 114-pound junior female title at the 2024 USA Boxing National Championships in Richmond. Named the junior female outstanding boxer of the tournament, the 12-time national champion also won gold at the National Junior Olympics last June and has a career record of 40–0.

FIGURE SKATING

At Ease

► **AT THE** ISU Junior Grand Prix Final in Grenoble, France, in December, Jacob Sanchez got off to an inauspicious start in the free skate: He stepped out of his opening triple axel. He says a flub like that would have derailed his program a year ago, when his self-imposed pressure to be perfect made him feel like he lost himself.

This season he embraced a new mantra: *Just trust yourself*. That mindset helped Jacob, 17, recover and take gold, becoming the first U.S. skater to win the Junior Grand Prix title in seven years and the first Hispanic skater to win the event. The distinction isn’t lost on Jacob, who is an

ambassador for Diversify Ice, a foundation supporting minorities in competitive figure skating.

“It’s very special,” says the Montgomery, N.Y., native whose family hails from Puerto Rico.

“It’s great to promote that everybody who’s like me can try skating because it’s such a beautiful sport. Nobody should shy away because they feel like they don’t fit in.” □



JURU KODRUM/INTERNATIONAL SKATING UNION/GETTY IMAGES (SANCHEZ); STEVE WOLTMANN (LEHEN); COURTESY OF SARAH DEHRLEIN (DEHRLEIN); COURTESY OF ART JAMES (RUIZ)

SKECHERS HANDS FREE **Slip-ins**

WIDE FIT | GLIDE-STEP



HANDS FREE, JUST STEP IN & GO

No Bending Over.

No Touching Shoes.

Just Step In & Go.

Introducing new Skechers Hands Free Slip-ins®. Putting on your shoes has never been easier. No bending over. No pulling them on. Just step in and go.



NEVER HAVE TO TOUCH YOUR SHOES AGAIN™

MACHINE WASHABLE

HOWIE LONG



LEARN MORE

SKECHERS.COM

Exclusive Heel Pillow™ holds your foot securely in place!

Sure, he wants
to win another
NBA title.
But the Celtics'
Finals MVP also
wants to
redefine the

ROLE OF SPORTS

in society
while tackling
the problem
of wealth
disparity

ONE
ONE

— **WITH** —

JAYLEN BROWN

by **CHRIS MANNIX**

MARCH
2025
SI.COM

20

photograph by **CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE**



F

FIFTEEN MINUTES into an interview, as Jaylen Brown is deep into an explanation on the ways that sports can be a mechanism for control, Joe Mazzulla busts through a door inside the Celtics' practice facility. "The most interesting man in the world," barks Boston's head coach. "Just look at this m---erf---er." Mazzulla gestures at Brown's outfit, which includes an oversized down jacket and jet-black sneakers, both from Brown's 741 collection, the clothing line the 28-year-old launched last fall after having concluded that the eight-figure offers dangled by legacy brands weren't for him.

In itself, that is intriguing. In the NBA, generating off-the-court income can be formulaic. Endorsement deals are the simplest: Sign with a major company, shoot a few commercials, blast out some posts on social media and zip over



STEPHEN GOSLING/NBAE/BETTY IMAGES



ONE ONE

— WITH —
JAYLEN BROWN

TRUE VALUE

Brown became the NBA's first \$300 million man in July 2023 and won a title the next season.

to China every offseason to hawk your merch. Brown did a deal like this in 2016, signing with Adidas before his rookie season, a partnership that ended in 2021. After that, he listened to pitches, rejecting offers before ultimately deciding to forge his own path.

The result was 741, a brand with a deeper meaning: In numerology, the number 7 represents spiritual awakening, wisdom and understanding, the 4 symbolizes hard work, stability and practicality with the 1 standing for new beginnings, creativity and independence. He's poured millions of his own money into the company and takes a hands-on approach with product design.

Ask Brown why he went this route, or why he's made any of the more interesting choices he's made on his way to becoming one of the NBA's top wing players, and he will seem perplexed by the question. "Why not?" Brown says. Why not take a scholarship from Cal, a college a long way from his hometown of Marietta, Ga., both geographically and culturally? Why not accept speaking offers from MIT, Harvard and Morehouse?

"I've never given the same speech twice," says Brown. Why not challenge the system? It hasn't hurt his game. He's a perennial All-Star who added Finals MVP and an NBA championship to his résumé last June. He wants to beat Cleveland in the playoffs. He just wants to defeat wealth inequality in Boston, too.

"It's who I am," says Brown, shrugging. "It's not like I developed this mindset. That's just who Jaylen is. The more you get to know my upbringing and how I was raised and how I've always handled myself, even as a high schooler, that was just me. So if anything, I was just going to be myself throughout this journey rather than be an alternate version that made people feel better about themselves or play a game that people tell you to or be corporate. I'm just going to be, however it goes—good or bad or indifferent, I'm going to just be Jaylen."

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: Besides family members, who would you say has had the most influence on you, especially in your younger formative years?

JAYLEN BROWN: It's probably a combination of historical figures, musicians, educators, activists.

SI: Who's on that list?

JB: Martin Luther King, Tupac, Toussaint. When I was at Berkeley, I took a class called Student Activism. Professor [Hardy] Frye, who's now

passed away, was part of the student [civil] rights movement. He actually helped create African American Studies programs at universities. We would look at different activists in different periods of time and different places in the world and we would compare and contrast these movements with today's times—their theories, everything.

For our final project, we had to create our own movement with a group of students. And you had to give your reasoning why it's different from everything else, why it'll work. Who's going to fund it? All different types of stuff. So that was one of my favorite things. That was one of my favorite classes at Berkeley that I carry with me to this day.

SI: You played basketball at Cal. But you could have played at a lot of places. You clearly wanted more out of your college experience.

JB: I've always looked at myself as an athlete and as an intellect just because of my educational background, the penchant for learning that my family instilled into me. So to find a university that could fulfill those two needs was paramount for me.

A lot of what I learned in my 10 months at Berkeley I still carry with me. I've given lectures on things that I learned there. Panopticism, dynamic normalization, social stratification, tracking, hegemony, things that people have heard me speak about are [things] that I was introduced to when I got to Berkeley.

SI: You were 21 when Harvard invited you to speak...

JB: They slid into my DMs.

SI: How'd that come about?

JB: I did this crazy article when I was in my second year in the league. I'm talking to some guy who I thought was just a regular Boston beat writer. I had no idea. But he's asking me all these questions about college and I'm giving him all these answers about stuff that I learned. It turned out he was one of the head writers for The Guardian. They titled the article, "Sports is a Mechanism of Control [in America]" and put my face right on the cover. It became controversial and viral that this young player who just had his life changed and just walked into a certain amount of wealth because of sports had made this statement saying sports is a mechanism for control—at 21 years old. It made people kind of interested.

SI: Did you agree with the article?

JB: I [did] agree with it. I was just elaborating from my perspective as a 21-year-old at the

ONE TO TALK

Brown has spoken at colleges as well as forums such as the Time 100 Next [opposite].

time, to give context. Some people took it as I was dissing sports—I'm talking bad about sports and sports are bad. But that's not what I meant at all. I was just coming from my perspective, knowing that sports have helped me change my life, but also that sports play a role in keeping people distracted from what's going on in the real world and how it plays its role for spectators, for media and in society to make you forget about some of the things that society is redefining.

SI: When it comes to apparel, the easiest thing for someone in your position to do would be to sign with a major company and collect a check. You didn't do that. You started your own brand. Why?

JB: Why not? Look at the state of footwear right now. Working for the Players Association for the last seven or eight years, I listened to players and their strifes about some of the things they wish they could see better in the sneaker



ONE ONE

— WITH —
JAYLEN BROWN

industry and the shoe companies, how there's a lack of value, a lack of understanding. And companies have been cutting back deals like crazy in the last couple of years. The major brands have dialed back for whatever reason. They've cut guys' endorsements; they just offer product now. And obviously guys feel some type of way about that, but what can they do?

So me having resources—and also [the way] my brain works to try to create solutions—I thought, I could speak about these things until I'm blue in the face or I can just try to create the solutions that you want to see in the world. And maybe my brand won't be that, but maybe it sparks somebody else for theirs to be and for them to start the journey.

Because in 2025, I think things can look different than they have in the past, with athletes being able to create some of their own brands and have ownership—we're already starting to see that in other sports.

SI: You had a pretty public feud with Nike last summer. You said back then you would share your story someday. Do you want to share it now?

JB: I'm sharing it now.

SI: The conflict with Nike?

JB: Conflicts with the sneaker industry, conflicts with athletes being viewed as dumb jocks.

SI: So it's all intertwined.

JB: It is. The industry has definitely cut back its funding and its resources towards athletes for whatever reason. The creativity has been a little bit dulled and the athlete's value isn't being reciprocated or respected in today's time. Obviously, a few athletes are getting the luxury of having great deals, but you can list those on both hands. So trying to create solutions or other ideas and show other athletes that you can take things into your own hands, create your own brands, create your own companies, I think gives the power back to the athlete.

"Sports have helped me changed my life, but also sports play a role in
KEEPING PEOPLE DISTRACTED *from what's going on in the real world."*



And if you still want to go sign with Nike or Adidas, no problem with that. But the fact that those are the only options and they kind of dominate the market is a part of the frustration that has grown among players because these are the options that you have and they all kind of stick together. They all give you the same kind of deal, and you have to accept it or not. O.K., if it doesn't work for you, then what? What do you do? So I'm trying to show athletes that you don't have to wait around if you don't want to.

SI: USA Basketball has denied it, but do you still think your issues with Nike cost you a spot on the Olympic team?

JB: For sure. One, I think sneaker industries, and I've said this before, have way too much control over the basketball foundation. In youth sports, it's the same. Kids are having to worry about even playing with Nike, playing well





photographs by CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE

*“I thought, I could speak about these things until I’m blue in the face or I can just try to **CREATE THE SOLUTIONS** that you want to see in the world.”*

on the Adidas circuit. And they should just be working on developing their basketball skills. Instead, we're focusing more on shoe politics, and I think that is why the rest of the world has caught up. And if we don't do something about it, the next Olympics and the next global outings are going to look a lot different.

SI: You're 28. You have a championship, you have been an All-Star, All-NBA. You have one of the biggest contracts in NBA history. What keeps you motivated?

JB: The next generation. Leaving behind a legacy that's better, that's more improved than it is now. Just having athletes think differently in the future, having athletes understand their value, having athletes encouraged to be able to create their own brands and to take their ownership back and see themselves as thinkers, CEOs, not just jocks that entertain people for a living. To see themselves as more evolved athletes, as a more evolved human beings, as people in their community—and to take the responsibility in that rather than just being told to just focus on basketball or focus on sports or focus on entertainment and everything else is whatever. No, you're the talented one. You have the God-given ability. You're the one in control. So just [for athletes] to understand that and to think for themselves."

SI: You have gone through a lot in Boston. Your selection was booed on draft night. You've been in trade talks almost every year. How challenging has that been?

JB: Very, very challenging, to be honest. Things have not gone my way. I haven't been catered to, in a sense, which has made me stronger. I think it has made me a better player, has driven me. I can complain, but in reality, it made me the best. So I'm grateful for it. Even if it was indirect, I know that it wasn't intentional. It is what it is. It made me better. I know there were a lot of people who didn't believe I would be in the position I am now. Some were in this building, some are no longer here, but I am. So I'm grateful, that's how I would describe it.

SI: Sounds like you've used a lot of that skepticism as fuel over the years.

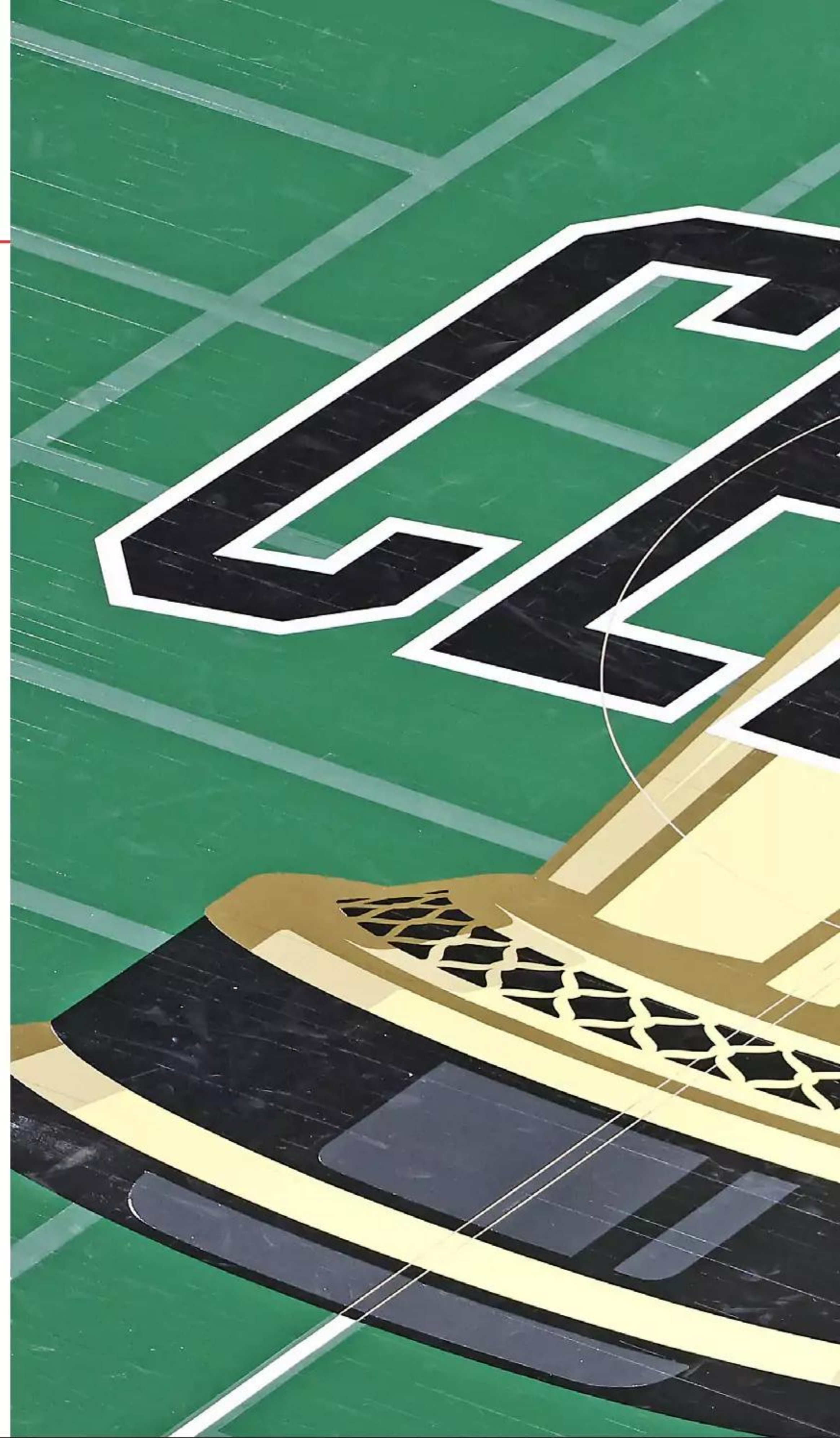
JB: Yeah, and I still do. I still think I have ceilings to reach. I don't feel like I've reached my ceiling. I still feel like there are things that I am still developing and I'm still working through with this organization, but it's no problem. And this is what I want the youth to hear. There's nothing wrong with being a part of a team and being a part of something bigger than yourself.

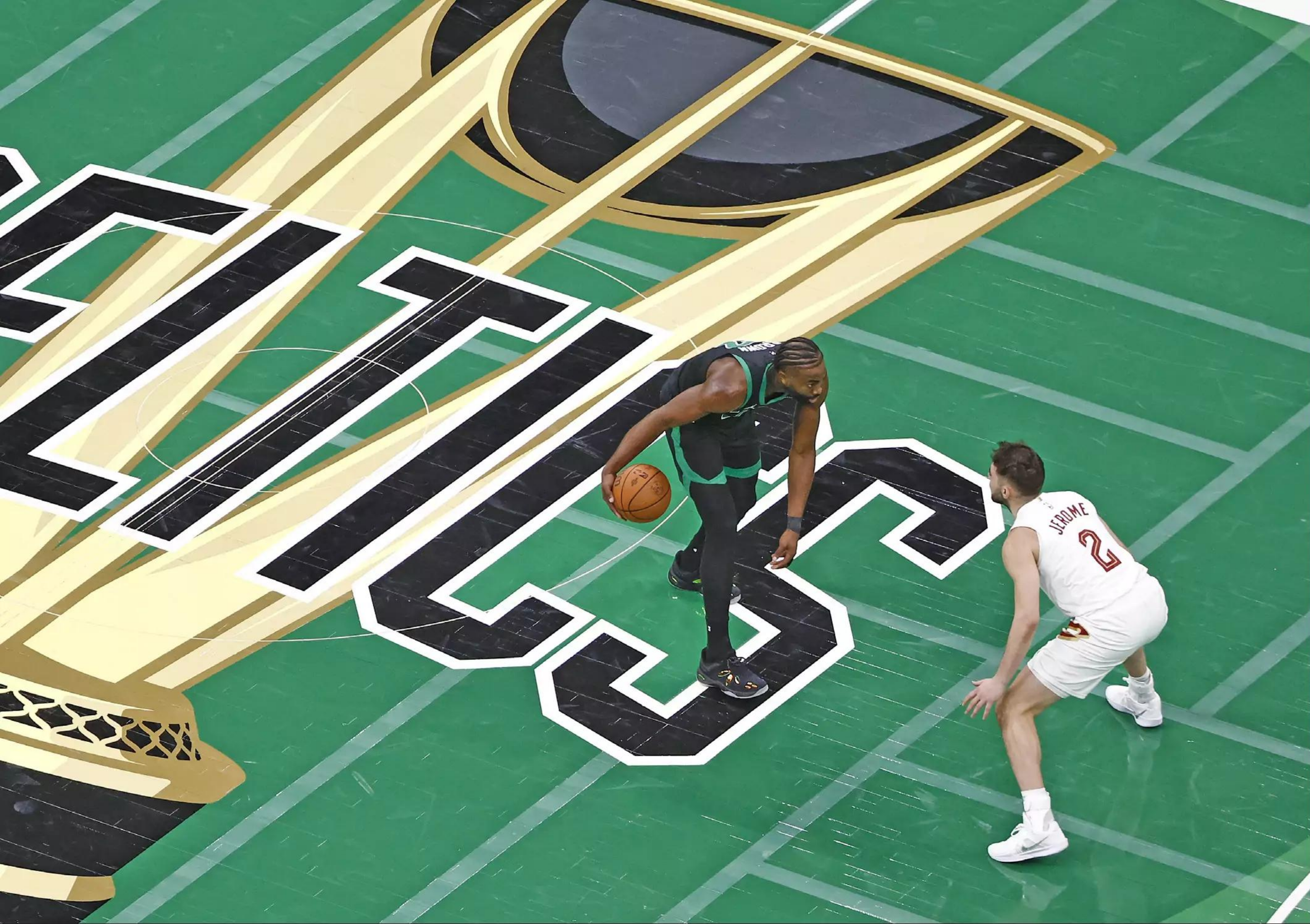
"Wealth disparity is something that isn't talked about to speak to that and give opportunities to those who

Winning the championship was one of my goals and it brought me so much joy to be a part of that. I would just say there's no problem with being that.

I've made sacrifices. I've watched things happen. A lot of stuff has transpired in this organization and I've understood it. I didn't complain—I didn't have an agent call and complain the way some of other guys do. I just let it make me better, and it fueled me and it's still fueling me now. So this is just a beginning for me. And I'm so invested in learning. I'm so invested in getting better and improving. It is fun to do. It's fun to do.

SI: You are also invested in this city. One of the things you did after you signed your \$300 million contract was launch the Boston Xchange to tackle the wealth disparity in the city. What was your motivation?





*enough, how it was created through **SYSTEMIC INEQUALITY**. To find instances weren't privileged is something I spend my time, effort and resources on."*

JB: *Wealth disparity is something that isn't talked about enough, how it was created through systemic inequality. And even though things are a lot different today, some of the initial foundations of systemic inequality still exist and have set marginalized people back. So to be able to find instances to still speak to that and then give opportunities to those who weren't privileged to inherit them is something that I spend my time, effort and resources on.*

I think a lot of times [athletes] have people thinking for them who just say to focus on basketball or whatever. And once again—you are people of influence that come from your community. You are educated, you have a high responsibility. Even though people tell you that you should not accept that responsibility, I believe you should. I don't think basketball is just about being a star player and just about

GREEN GIANT

At 28, Brown has solidified his spot in the C's pantheon: His career scoring average (18.9 points per game) is ninth in team history.

the cars, the clothes, the money or the attention. It's also about responsibility. But I feel like the people who are around players—the agents, etcetera—[can make] the overall narrative that you should be more focused on these things.

The influence is pushing them [to think] that that's the most important thing. You get praised for doing those things, but you don't get praised, you don't get nearly as much attention for doing what's right in your community. And that can sometimes confuse the minds of our young athletes because obviously we put them on a pedestal.

I think they should be celebrated more for what they do in their community rather than them being on TMZ or who they're dating or what kind of car they've got. I just think society is backwards. □

ONE
ONE
—WITH—

LINDSEY VONN

Five years after
retiring from
competition,
the 40-year-old
skiing stalwart
has made a
rapid, pain-free

COMEBACK

with one clear
goal in mind:
to race at the
2026 Winter
Olympics

MARCH
2025
SI.COM

30

JULIAN FINNEY/GETTY IMAGES

by **GREG BISHOP**





WITH
LINDSEY VONN



YES, LINDSEY VONN understands the landscape. Tom Brady. Simone Biles. Novak Djokovic. “And LeBron,” she says in early January, shortly after her unprecedented comeback at age 40, “is only a few months younger than I am, and he’s still breaking records every game he plays, pretty much, so ...”

Yes, Lindsey Vonn heard from all of you. That she’s “gone completely mad,” as one retired skier so sensitively put it. That she’s craving attention. That she should have stayed retired.

Last summer Vonn went to Paris, where Biles, 27, was the oldest U.S. gymnast to compete at the Olympics since 1952. Vonn watched Biles, she says, “far exceed what everyone believed to be the limits of a gymnast’s physical ability to perform” in her third Games.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: They called Simone “grandma.”

LINDSEY VONN: *Nobody’s said that to me yet. Or at least not to my face.*

SI: *Brady told me 10 years ago that older, elite athletes are examined with old paradigms. Do you agree?*

LV: *Totally. You can’t compare athletes now to even 10 years ago, because of what’s available. There’s so much more we understand and know about the body and performance.*

Age is not an indication these days of whether an athlete can be successful or not. The biggest question is, do they have the skill? Do they have the knowledge? Brady was the smartest quarterback in history. That knowledge has value. And, in ski racing, it’s similar.

I have been racing for a lot longer than a lot of [my competitors] have been alive. I have a lot more knowledge. And that is meaningful. I have the ability to put those things together and do exactly what Tom did.

SI: *Beautiful answer, if only because your interviewer put on Biofreeze before a Zoom call this morning.*

LV: *Amazing. You smell great.*

Vonn never planned this comeback. It just sort of happened. The basics: Injuries accumulated until she could no longer compete; she worked on her body, stayed in shape and had access to all sorts of elite doctors. Had conversations with them. Listened to them. Then met one who was different than the others, and that changed the only opinion that mattered—hers.

SI: *Patience seems critical here. Not the first thing I’d associate with ski racing, but it’s necessary, no?*

LV: *We are the epitome of an outside, outdoor sport. You have to be patient with the weather, the schedule; it’s a game of hurry up and wait. You have to be patient right up until that moment, which requires aggression, balance, calmness and a strong mind.*

To understand how the impossible became quite possible, allow Vonn to explain:

“I dream big. I’ve always dreamed big. I’ve been about the Olympics since I met Picabo Street when I was 9. I have lots of dreams, and I’m still dreaming pretty high. That part of me hasn’t changed, and I don’t think it ever will, so you can imagine what I’m thinking about...”

SI: *You seem... free now. Fair?*

LV: *I mean, sometimes people’s perception of me changed. My perception of myself never has. I’m still the same little girl who wanted to be a ski racer and wanted to be an Olympian.*

Maybe now, I'm just a little bit more myself; I don't have the expectations or outside pressure I might have felt more before. People see this in my face. I'm having such a great time. I'm laughing. I'm smiling. And some of that is a weight that's been lifted off of me.

I feel like a kid, and that may sound weird coming from a 40-year-old. But, sometimes, you just never grow up. Maybe that means I'm naïve. But I still dream.

V **VONN RETIRED** only when her dreams felt unreachable, her body broken, ligaments torn, in daily pain. She left competitive ski racing in 2019 after 15 seasons with 82 World Cup wins, at the time the most ever for a female competitor—a mark since

broken by Mikaela Shiffrin, who has 99. And second-most ever, behind the pre-Shiffrin gold standard, 86 victories by Ingemar Stenmark. Vonn also claimed three Olympic medals, 20 World Cup titles (including four Crystal Globes for overall performance), eight world championship medals and 137 World Cup podiums. But she also tore her ACL and MCL in her right knee in a 2013 crash. And then reinjured that same ACL later that year. In '18, she tore her LCL in her left knee and had multiple fractures in that

MARCH
2025
SI.COM

33

ALL SMILES

Eight months after her knee surgery, Vonn was wowing fans in St. Moritz, Switzerland.



same leg during a training crash. And that's not counting another knee fracture, ankle fracture and severe arm fracture in between those tears.

LV: *My injuries held me back.*

I didn't miss it. I was in so much pain the last few years of my career, that it was time; I was at peace with being finished. I didn't have any regrets about it. But, of course, I missed going fast.

She dove into retirement by taking off the bubble wrap elite skiers must don to survive a dangerous sport. She windsurfed and surfed wakes. She tried polo, but that didn't work out. She injured her back after a bad fall from one horse, got healthy and climbed right back on. She took adventures, traveled the world. And she skied recreationally, traveling to slopes she had never raced on, taking leisurely runs, not knowing what she might do on a particular afternoon. She entertained tons of business opportunities and continued her work empowering and supporting underserved young women in competitive skiing. She also helped bring the Winter Games to Salt Lake City in 2034.

LV: *Just being as injured as I have been, I have had to wise up and figure out what my body can and can't do, what my injuries mean, what it looks like, what it feels like. I have to understand my anatomy better than anyone else, and that's been the case since my first ACL tear [in 2013] because I had problems I didn't quite understand until later.*

She leaned on specialists and other doctors they recommended. Dr. Tom Hackett, a complex knee and shoulder surgeon based in Colorado, recommended Dr. Martin Roche, perhaps the foremost international expert on robotic and sensor-assisted surgery who is based in Florida.

LV: *Doctors have different opinions. It was important for me to research and take them all in. My body, technically, if you read an MRI, says I need a full knee replacement. Because it's done. Every doctor Vonn saw recommended a total knee replacement. Except one: Roche.*

LV: *He had a different perspective, and he was very smart about it. Because of him, we found I had a cyst in my bone from one of my ACL surgeries, and I couldn't even get the replacements because I needed to clean out the cyst and refill, repack the bone.*

Vonn also spoke with others who had undergone this specific surgery. Like Chris Davenport, an extreme skier who saw Roche and now skis nearly half the year. Hackett performed the cyst cleanup for Vonn in July 2023. Roche did the partial replacement—what's known as

robot-assisted replacement—by cutting off three millimeters of bone and replacing that with two titanium pieces.

LV: *I had only hoped to live life pain free. [The procedure] changed my life entirely. I used to think about my knee pretty much every second of every day. Wake up sore, swollen. I would go on a hike with my friend and her 7-year-old and Aunt Lindsey would need a break after*



10 minutes. It was really hard. And I thought, when I retired, giving my body a break would take away a lot of pain. And it didn't.



NE MONTH after the second surgery, Vonn could straighten that troublesome right leg. Once back in the gym, she tried exercises she had long ago shelved—too painful—and sometimes her body felt like it was eight years younger; other times, even younger than that. Once back on the slopes, she was knocking out nine training runs at first, then 15 in a single day; she hadn't done that since her mid-20s.

She knew she wanted to come back, regardless of history, after that very first training run.

WITH
LINDSEY VONN

IV: *Everything felt so different. When I got the surgery, I just felt so good. No more pain. All the things that had been bothering me for so many years were suddenly gone.*

Comeback became her mission. At the highest levels of her sport, too. Finally able to train without her knee swelling, she could dream again.

Vonn enrolled in the drug testing program for World Cup competitors last September, and

GOING FOR GOLD

Vonn, who won her first Olympic medal in 2010 (left), was part of the winning bid to bring the Games back to Salt Lake City in 2034.



was promptly tested the next day—and “quite frequently” since. She shifted back into her old life as quietly as possible. But not quietly enough. News spread slowly, informally at first, within the insular world she’d left behind. She was coming back—as the Bionic Woman.

IV: *I do feel bionic. I was saying that even before my knee replacement, because I have a plate and 18 screws in my arm, which gives me a pretty good volleyball serve. I’ve been put together more times than I’d care to count or admit. If titanium will heal me, I’ll be the Terminator, any time.*

Ahead of her 40th birthday in October, Vonn canceled a trip to a tropical destination that she had planned roughly six months earlier. Instead, she found herself training in Austria.

IV: *I didn’t expect to be there. I needed to do something special for my 40th. We went to this cute hotel on Lake Como, had a nice dinner, a little cake, and that’s it.*

Vonn’s thinking had changed after the partial replacement. Sure, she needed to adjust to new equipment and ramp back, slowly, toward her own standard. She completed the required doping tests. Reentered World Cup qualifying. Rejoined the U.S. team, mentoring skiers whose median age is 26. Took part in lower-level competitions at Copper Mountain in Colorado. Qualified with a wild card. Served as the forerunner—skiing ahead of the field to test the course and timing system—in nearby Beaver Creek. Earned enough points to compete on the World Cup circuit. Flew to Switzerland in December. Competed in her first World Cup race since failing to finish a Super-G race in January 2019 in Italy. Had butterflies before competing—first time, long time. Raced, first, at about 85%. Upped that to 90% for her second spin down a mountain, at full speed.

IV: *I’ve trained with top-30, top-20, even top-10 [competitors] for the last few weeks. Some days, I’m winning training. Some days, I’m testing out equipment. There’s some rust to shake off. But I haven’t really lost anything. I feel like I’m right where I left off, and I’m actually healthier now than I was for the last few years.*

IN TERMS of acclimation, that famous *Anchorman* quote applies: “Boy, that escalated quickly!” Vonn stuck around Europe, continued training and competed again in January in St. Anton, Austria. In two more world-class competitions, without a full ramp-up, and less than a year since her last operation, she placed sixth (downhill) and fourth (Super-G), just missing the podium.

IV: *I’m skiing without thinking about my knee, which I haven’t done since 2013. I’m stronger than I was. It’s better than nonexistent cartilage.*

Should Vonn return to even near her peak form, which seems more likely week after week, she would become the oldest woman to win a World Cup race (Federica Brignone of Italy placed first in October and again at St. Anton, both times at age 34). On the men’s side, Johan Clarey of France won silver in the downhill at the 2022 Beijing Olympics at age 41 and made a World Cup podium at Kitzbühel at 42. So far, no one who covers or documents the sport can find another example of a woman racing at age 40 or older. NBC Sports reported that Vonn was



the first woman in her 40s to score World Cup standings points, which she did every time she finished in the top 30.

LV: *I have to be patient. I know what I'm capable of. I'm really close.*

The prize: compete in the Winter Olympics in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, next February. Vonn has won three Olympic medals, including downhill gold in the 2010 Vancouver Games. First, though, she wants to finish this season, finally take that tropical vacation, and then begin preparations for next season.

LV: *Would I have come back if Cortina weren't there? I don't know. That was one thing that really bothered me when I retired. I wanted*

FRESH START

As the oldest woman to compete in a World Cup race, Vonn says she feels stronger than she did 10 years ago.

*"I do feel bionic. I've been put together more times than I'd care to count or admit. If titanium will heal me, I'll be **THE TERMINATOR** anytime."*

to race in Cortina. That was a big goal and dream of mine.

Competing in Cortina would mark her fifth Olympic Games. She already holds the record for most World Cup wins there, with six in downhill and six in Super-G. She recorded her first podium finish there (2004), notched her first World Cup title there (downhill, '08) broke the all-time wins record there ('15) and broke the all-time downhill wins record there ('16).

LV: *I have a different connection with every mountain, if that makes sense. I understood Cortina very well. I knew the line I needed to take. Knew where the fall line was. Knew how to ski. It was a meaningful place for me, to begin with. Would be a great place to ... close the loop.*

Should that happen, with Vonn officially ending her career (this time for good) at the place where she has accomplished so much, perhaps there could be a Lindsey Vonn surgery, like the Tommy John procedure in baseball.

LV: *I don't know if you'll see that in sports. Because I feel like most people, when their knee gets that bad, they would quit anyway. It's a good option for many, many, many athletes who are retiring or have already retired.*

We all view knee replacement as a scary thing that happens when you get old and can't walk anymore. But you're able to bounce back faster and recover easier.

She still confronts hundreds of outdated takes. She wants her comeback to inspire paradigm change, too.

LV: *As athletes, we adapt and we figure out how to manage pain. But there comes a point when you don't have to live that way anymore. We have technology to fix things that we thought were unfixable. That perspective, of competing at older ages, needs to change.*

SI: *Some of the reaction to your comeback is wild.*

LV: *Been a little frustrating, because that's a close-minded way to think. This is 2025—a lot of things have changed. The conversation is not in the same universe as it was 25 years ago. I don't put any weight behind those comments [from competitors who retired a long time ago], and I actually feel sorry for them. They would have benefited from these procedures. I do hope this opens people's eyes to what's possible. I already have skiers calling me, asking about their knees, hips.*

Vonn's mother, Lindy Krohn Lund, died in 2022, one year after having been diagnosed with ALS. Lund suffered a stroke while giving birth to Lindsey, which partially paralyzed her left leg. Vonn watched her mother struggle and fight for the remainder of her life.

She begins to cry, softly at first, then a little louder.

LV: *No, it's a beautiful thing. I think about it every day. (Brief pause.) Some idiot online said, "I hope Lindsey has a lot of guardian angels, because what she's doing is crazy." And, unfortunately, I do. She'd be proud of me. I reread her journals when she passed, and every time I had a race, she was up at 3 a.m. watching, and in her journal, she would write the date, the time, the place I got.*

I actually feel very protected, in a weird way, because I know she's looking out for me, and that gives me strength. □

ONE
ONE
WITH

TONY DUNGY

— by **CONOR ORR**

WHEN NOTRE DAME took the field against Penn State on Jan. 9, in the College Football Playoff semifinal, the coaching matchup between Marcus Freeman and James Franklin meant that, for the first time in college football history, the FBS championship was guaranteed to feature a Black head coach. It was as meaningful as it was stunning, given that the NFL's first Black Super Bowl-winning head coach, Tony Dungy, accomplished that feat nearly two decades earlier.

Dungy, to this day, maintains an influential presence in the coaching and football world. Whether it's as an analyst for NBC, as an informal adviser to countless coaches and players alike, as a parent (Dungy and his wife, Lauren, with three biological kids, adopted eight children and have fostered 100 more, which means a life full of practices at multiple levels) or as a mentor and author of two *New York Times* best-selling books, the 69-year-old is just as busy now as he was when he was the head coach of the Buccaneers and the Colts.

Are football teams being shortsighted in their hiring processes? The first Black coach to win a SUPER BOWL thinks the best candidates aren't always given a chance to succeed

MARCH
2025
SI.COM

38

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: Because coaching is innate within you, after you retired, when was the last time you considered coming back?

TONY DUNGY: *I was talking to Martin Mayhew when he was general manager of the Lions, recommending Jim Caldwell [back in 2014]. So we're going back and forth and he's listening about Jim and then he says, "Well, I just have to ask you one thing for the Ford family—would you consider this?" I grew up in the Detroit area, the Lions were my dad's favorite team, and I said, "Martin, if my dad was still alive, you probably would have me." That's the closest I got to it. Usually people would call and I'd just even dismiss it without even thinking about it. That one I had to think about a little bit.*

SI: Dan Campbell changed everything for that franchise. Is there another Dan Campbell out there?

TD: *I think there's some people. I've really been impressed with Brian Flores and what he's done in Minnesota, and I think he's a leader. He's a guy who has head coaching experience, and*



WISE WORDS

After 13 seasons as a head coach, Dungy, who picked up a mic in 2009, is an unofficial adviser to countless coaches and players.

what he's done with that defense and the way his players talk about him, he's a guy I would definitely look at.

SI: You became the first Black head coach to win a Super Bowl back in 2007. We had our first Black coach vying for that chance in the College Football Playoff in 2025. What do you make of that?

TD: It took me back to my buddy Tyrone Willingham. Tyrone was at Stanford and doing very well, and he knew the Stanford way of doing things. He went to Notre Dame and I asked him, "Tyrone, why would you leave a place where you're so comfortable and you've got it going so well?" And he said, "Well, at Notre Dame I would have a chance to win a national championship, and I think we need that." He took a chance; it didn't work out, but that was his thought process. That was what, 15, 18 years ago? And it hasn't really happened. It hasn't germinated. I remember when James Franklin left Vanderbilt and went to Penn State, and I thought, Same thing. To me, that's the neat thing about this. When you start seeing guys get opportunities at schools where you have a chance to ring the bell, that's going to be a whole different perspective now.

SI: What are we getting wrong about hiring coaches now? The Patriots flew through their process, having fired Jerod Mayo after just one season, and hired Mike Vrabel in a matter of days. There were some teams that interviewed more than a dozen candidates.



TD: People are thinking outside the box a little more, but I look at some of these big searches as the wrong way to do it. I grew up in the Pittsburgh system. Dan Rooney had a philosophy. A lot of these owners, they really don't know what they're looking for, so they are just searching and trying to turn over every stone. Here's what Dan Rooney said: "I want a young coach because I don't want to do this every five or six years, so I want somebody in their 30s that's going to be here for 20 years. We're a cold-weather, blue-collar city, so I want defense. That's what we're going to hang our hat on. And I want somebody who's a great teacher and a great communicator." So he could narrow things down right away. And in 1969, he comes up with unknown Chuck Noll. And then in 1992, he comes up with little-known Bill Cowher, and then in 2007 he comes up with little-known Mike Tomlin. Well, he knew what he was looking for. He didn't have to interview 500 people.

I think that's what's missing with some of these people. They're not sure what they're looking for. So they better talk to everybody that's hot. They better talk to every candidate that is under the rug. Figure out what you want—that's what I always ask guys when they talk to me, owners, general managers: Do you want

CURRENT AFFAIRS

Tomlin (near right) has a Super Bowl ring, while Freeman and Franklin (far right) are trying to be NCAA trailblazers.

TD: I just shake my head at that. And then I'm upset at some of these other teams. I think the New England Patriots made a great hire with Mike Vrabel, but the process is so messed up. To hire Jerod Mayo and only give him one year and then say, "Well, I didn't like the way it was going." And then for the Raiders to do that with Antonio Pierce. That speaks to me of people that don't know the process, don't know what they're doing, don't learn from history. I played for Chuck Noll, who won four Super Bowls. He was 1–13 his first year. I played for Bill Walsh in his first year in San Francisco. Joe Montana was our rookie backup quarterback. We won two games. O.K., that's three more Super Bowls. Tom Landry won [zero] games his first year, so that's nine Super Bowls with guys that won two games or less their first year. And so to say, "Well, we need more progress" or "I expected us to be better right away," it doesn't always go that way. I was 0–5 in my first year [with Tampa Bay] and the owners took me to lunch.

*"I look at some of these big searches as the **WRONG WAY** to do it. A lot of these owners, they really don't know what they're looking for."*



young? Do you want experience? Do you want offense? Do you want defense? Tell me what you're looking for and then I can give you three or four names of who might be good. When you just say, "Well, tell me who's good, tell me who's dynamic," that takes in a lot of territory.

SI: Speaking of Tomlin, does it make you laugh that this guy makes the playoffs every year and everyone is in a rush to get rid of him?

I thought they were going to fire me. And they said, "No, we just want you to know this is the long-term process. We're in it for the long haul. Don't panic." We ended up going 1–8 before we turned it around. But that thought process seems to be gone now.

SI: I talk to a lot of veteran head coaches who view this kind of impatience with inexperienced coaches as a symptom of the epidemic

WITH
TONY DUNGY

we're seeing with clock mismanagement, timeout misuse, all of that. What about you?

TD: Yeah. And people learn and they grow and they get better, and that's part of it. I was in the system for 15 years [before becoming a head coach] and I thought I knew everything. I'd worked for Dennis Green, for Marty [Schottenheimer], for Chuck Noll. I'm going to be ready to go. There's nothing I need to know.

Well, the first day on the job, things start coming up. I'm in my office trying to hire my staff, I'm calling guys and the director of operations comes in and says, "Hey, coach, welcome. It's good to have you here. I need to know today what hotels we want to stay at on the road and what airline we want to use as our commuter airline." I don't know. I don't care. I never thought about that. "Well, we need to know." Those are the kind of things that hit you that you're not prepared for. And then, "Hey, I've got Player So-and-So, and he's got this issue and he needs to come talk to you." Well, I never

going to be, and I think we have really bad expectations in that regard.

SI: Was the airline issue the weirdest first-time head coaching problem you faced?

TD: We'd had 13 straight losing seasons at Tampa before I took the job. One of the things I did, I called every veteran on the roster, introduced myself over the phone and said, "I want you to come in and see me, and I want to hear from you why we haven't won since you've been here." Well, there were a lot of things. "Hey, they took the Coke machine out of the locker room. We used to have free Cokes and now we don't." Or, "Yeah, we're staying at these different hotels that are off the beaten path." Well, I found out [former Bucs head coach Sam Wyche] didn't want to be downtown with the distractions. It wasn't that the owners were cheap and it wasn't that they didn't know what they're doing. That's what the coach wanted. So hey, that's easy to fix. I went to the owners, they said, "You can stay wherever you want." That was one thing that helped the players, but [while] learning those things, I'm thinking, "Hey, we just got to get the quarterback squared away."

Culture and changing the culture and figuring out what the culture is—it was different. We had a building that was built in the 1970s for the original Bucs. It had 40 lockers for the players and nine lockers for the coaches. Well, now we had 53 guys on the team, and so we got 13 guys sharing lockers. We've got coaches sharing lockers. You don't think you're going to have to deal with that as the head coach. That's not even on your radar. Well, how am I going to handle that? What's going to happen? Herm Edwards is my assistant head coach. He took a closet for his office.

SI: Juxtapose that with what you're seeing in college and NIL now. Millions of dollars. Constant transfers.

TD: I talked to [Oregon head coach] Dan Lanning this summer, and he told me that his job has really changed. He said, "I really don't coach that much anymore. I counsel. I'm always putting my arm around a player, 'Hey, don't leave. I know you didn't get the ball as much as you thought, but we've got plans for you.' Or, 'No, you had a great game and I know you've got 10 people now who are recruiting you, but we still got plans.'" He said that's all he does. And I started thinking about that and saying, "Gosh, is that really what we want our head coaches to do?" But that's life in the major programs right now. □



had that before. I never talked to the offensive players, and now I've got to do all that. And so there's a growing cycle of what has to happen, and there's things that you can't be prepared for because you haven't dealt with them [before]. You're going to learn how to deal with them and you're going to get better at that, but it's a process. And to think that in two games or six weeks, you can be perfect at it—you're not

ONE
ONE
—WITH—

NNEKA OGWUMIKE



W **HILE ATTENDING** the 2023 NCAA women's Final Four, amid an electric atmosphere that would soon tip into national conversation, Nneka Ogumike thought: *Now this is different.* That weekend in Dallas saw Caitlin Clark and Iowa pitted against Angel Reese and LSU. And it set up the WNBA for explosive growth a year later.

The league changed on almost every level in 2024. Just ask Ogumike. With the Storm, the 13-year veteran forward was named an All-Star for the ninth time in her career, while moonlighting as the president of the WNBA Players' Association, a job she's held since '16. In all that time, she never imagined playing in a league that looked as it did last season. Ogumike has steered her fellow players through a variety of challenges—but never one as exhilarating as this.

The highly anticipated '24 draft class brought the record viewership and attendance, and the WNBA's surge in popularity resulted in some major wins for its players, such as the introduction of charter flights. Rookie of the Year

With the
popularity
of women's
basketball at an
all-time high,
the WNBA

PRESIDENT

and her fellow
competitors
want to make
sure this
moment is here
to stay

MARCH
2025
SI.COM

by **EMMA BACCELLIERI**

photograph by
JEFFERY A. SALTER

hair by Keshia Tabaran

makeup by Alexis Renny
for Exclusive Artists

styling by Marc Desir for KMCME
assisted by Le'Shaunda Anthony
for KMCME

dress by Öfürë

jewelry by Sana Crown

shoes by Giuseppe Zanotti



Clark attracted unprecedented media hype and converted it into ratings and merchandise sales. But all of that growth came with growing pains, Ogwumike notes, with the intense spotlight bringing new security concerns and ugly discourse.

In October, the union decided to opt out of its collective bargaining agreement with the WNBA, choosing instead to renegotiate in the wake of the league's new 11-year media rights deal worth \$2.2 billion. With the current CBA now set to expire at the end of the 2025 season, Ogwumike and the rest of the WNBPA have their sights set on higher salaries, better long-term benefits, improved facilities and making sure this boom isn't just a moment, but a chance for lasting progress.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: What did the growth of last season feel like for someone who's been here as long as you have?

NNEKA OGWUMIKE: I have more of an attitude of, like, Welcome, y'all, hey, what's up? The water's warm. There are a lot of different emotions. I know, especially for the players, every experience with this growth was not positive. And I like to attribute that to being the growing pains of something that is really taking off. But I lean heavily on things that are to be celebrated, to be discovered, to be curious about and to be built off of. So a lot of my emotions were around not just the excitement of bringing in new faces, but also the pride in engaging with those who have been with us for so long, and then ultimately everyone coming in and recognizing that we all have a hand in this growth.

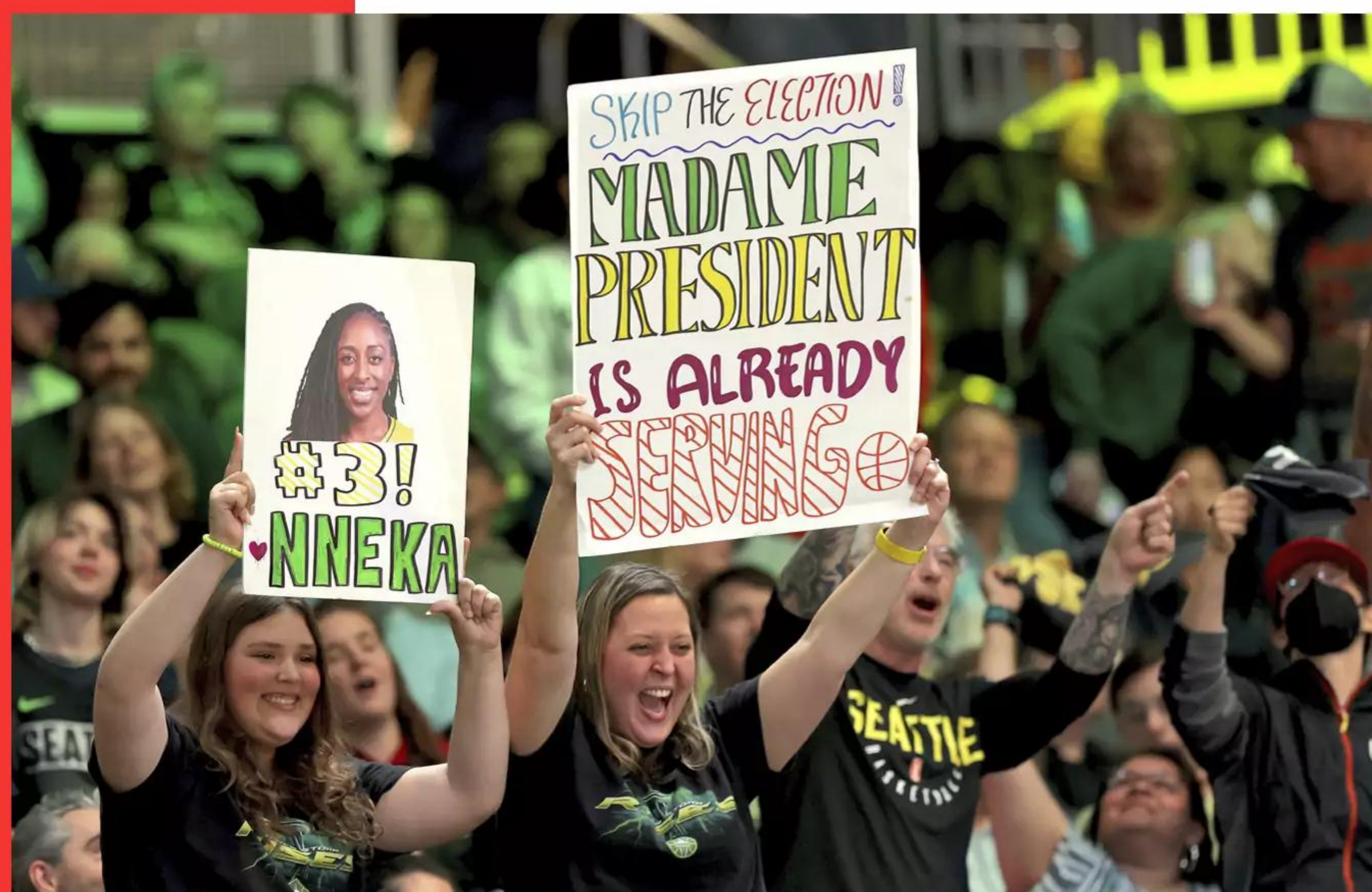
SI: You mentioned the growing pains of this year. What were some of the biggest challenges?

NO: I think the biggest challenge for me—truly the pains of growing—were a lot of new followers and different cohorts that came into something that we've cherished for so long, something that we've respected and admired for so long, and understanding that [increased popularity is] not all pretty. I really hate hearing stories about players having to deal with—I mean, "hecklers" would be putting it lightly. There's a lot of harassment that players have had to deal with. It doesn't matter who you're a fan of. It was experienced across the board. But most certainly by a lot of these Black women who ultimately are the foundation of this league. And so I don't hope—I expect, because that's the only thing we can do—for things to not just get better, but also for there to be more respect,

for there to be more education, perhaps more curiosity and less hate.

SI: As the conversations around the league got bigger, as those new voices got more involved, was there anything you felt was being missed?

NO: I think there are always stories that can be told. This is something that I've noticed and have been more vocal about since I joined. I think ensuring there's a diversity in storytelling, and just heralding players who are doing awesome, I think it's important for us to not miss those



BALLOT BALL

The political savvy of Ogwumike, who spoke at a voting rally in October (far right), wasn't lost on fans in an election year.

MARCH
2025
SI.COM

things as players. We try to do our best to be on the right side of things, or at least acknowledge when something is happening. And I see the league growing in that way. But I do feel as though there's always a point of emphasis there, when it comes to just facing things head-on, and with integrity and transparency, in a way that I think that the players really do appreciate.

SI: Did you feel like the league was prepared to navigate that change?

NO: I don't think anybody was. I think we all had been anticipating growth, and for it to happen in the way that it did in this past year, I'm not sure that anybody was ready. And so of course, we're making sure that we can get things done, stay true to who we are, while also addressing and preparing and being ready for

ONE ONE

—WITH—
NNEKA OGWUMIKE

whatever comes our way. It's really no knock. I think that these are great problems to be talking about. But I also think that it yields more learning opportunities.

SI: And what did the process feel like for you?

NO: I don't like to panic when things start to change. I like to observe and see how things are going. But I feel like the pivot kind of occurred the year before that. Being at that Final Four, and seeing what that environment was like, and slowly experiencing that at the professional level—it wasn't necessarily a jolt. But I did feel as though, once you started playing games live, you're realizing, like, Oh, man, it's loud in here, I can't hear anything. And getting the [charter flights] and being able to sleep in your own bed. The night after playing in Atlanta, I'm sleeping in my bed in Seattle—that's something I definitely had to get used to.

I think I went from feeling overly prepared for any scenario to now being able to relax a

that we do know we have, and maintaining our collective collaboration and the vision toward what we want. And my conversations have changed because the composition of the league is very different now. I'm serving my third term, and I was very young in the beginning, still almost looking up to those players that I was representing. Now [at 34] I'm older than almost all of the players and have had such an experience playing and also being a part of the executive committee and the players' union, I feel as though I can maybe impart a little bit more advice and a little bit more guidance. I kind of view it as passing the torch. I'm not playing forever—that's the reality. And I want to be able to leave things better than when I entered it.

SI: How do you feel that you've grown as a leader in those eight-plus years?

NO: I definitely lean into a kind of servant leadership. It's who I am. I'm a Cancer sign. I'm an oldest daughter in a Nigerian family. (Laughs.) There's no escaping how I help and I nurture, but I think that I've tried to also lean on that for myself, helping and nurturing myself, whether it's educating myself a little bit more, or understanding that there's really no boundaries on who you can learn from. I learn a lot from different athletes in this league, different women in this league. They don't have to be older than me, they don't have to be more experienced. There's a lot to say when I'm able to have conversations that yield information or experiences that I don't personally have. I think that's kind of the beauty of why we're able to mobilize the way we do in the W.

SI: You mentioned the idea of more hanging in the balance here, of having a lot of options and needing to capitalize. How are you thinking about leverage and power heading into these negotiations?

NO: I feel like it's time to stand on business. You find yourself in different positions, not randomly, not by chance. I think that the time is now and we are here. And to not take advantage of that...it would be a disservice to ourselves, to the league, to the union, to the history, to the future of women's basketball.

SI: How do you set priorities for a negotiation as big as this one?

NO: It's definitely not me who does it. There's a team for a reason. We have a phenomenal staff with the Players' Association, we have an amazing board of advisers, and so a lot of what

*"I'm not sure if enough should be in our vocabulary. I think you always **SHOOT FOR THE STARS**. You can never shoot too high. Nothing is enough right now."*

little bit and focus on playing. With so many of these changes—and being able to engage with fans and share in the celebration and the love of the sport—also came resources like the practice facility that I get to play in and how we get to travel. It's not just the experience. It's the vitality of what we do. We're able to perform at a level that maintains this excitement that we're seeing come in.

SI: How did that change the conversations you've had as a union leader this year?

NO: You know, there's more hanging in the balance, relative to the time that we're playing in. And so conversations with different athletes have been mostly about being smart, knowing that we have options, ensuring that we capitalize on the options



ONE ONE

WITH
NNEKA OGWUMIKE

MARCH
2025
SI.COM

46

we do is teamwork. That's where the communication comes in. That's where asking questions of players, asking for ideas, pitching anything they feel can make this league and their experience, and the experience of those to come, even better, and also those who have played. What the players say is what's priority.

SI: Is there anything that stands out as particularly important here or anything that you really want to make sure that you all can address at the table?

NO: We're still kind of in the early stages. It's no secret that salary and compensation is something that's very important, especially as we continue to see expansion of teams and also as we continue to see so many people aspiring to play in this league. This is touted as the best league in the world. And so making sure that people are paid in a way that reflects their value has always been a priority, and that hasn't changed.

SI: So much is in flux right now. You have a huge cohort of players coming up in free agency next year, you have teams building new practice facilities, you had a slew of coaching and front office changes this year. How do you think about what the future looks like both as a player and as a leader who's trying to chart a course?

NO: I'm a very optimistic person. I'm very idealistic, I guess you could say, and so I feel like the future is blindingly bright, honestly. I mean, I'm 13 years in, and I've now played in what I can say is a home, at our practice facility, and I've flown charter—I never imagined that would happen, let alone while I was playing, you know? And so these indications, to me, show that what we've always been feeling from the inside is finally coming to fruition. I envision us being able to play only in the WNBA and not having to supplement incomes. I envision athletes from other countries aspiring to come and play and have careers in the WNBA, perhaps only the WNBA. There's so much that can, and I think will, happen. And I really feel like we're just on the cusp of it.

SI: What does it feel like to see those possibilities open up, or at least have the timeline speed up, in a way that might have seemed unthinkable five years ago when the last CBA was signed?

NO: It feels amazing, you know? It feels surreal, but it's not. I'm also trying to make sure that I occupy this space of, Yeah, this was supposed to happen, and not one out of fear that it will

disappear. I'm someone who always wants sustainable change, and I hope those who are also contributing to this change understand that we want this to last a long time, and the feeling of it happening and it staying, I think, is that of "yes, and."

SI: And how do you think about ambition in that context? You want this to be sustainable, you want to make sure this is going to last, but you can also dream much bigger than you could a few years ago.

NO: I think when you're in an industry like sport, and specifically women's sports, I'm not sure if enough should be in our vocabulary. I think you always shoot for the stars. You can never shoot too high. And I say that with the confidence that we exist as a cohort of women who understand the business to the degree that we can negotiate and aspire and strive for things that make sense. Things that make sense today, that make sense for us, that make sense to build off of in the future, and right now—nothing is enough right now.

SI: What else do you want people to know about the league right now?

NO: I'm overwhelmed with how much we're experiencing. I'm hoping that fans and followers are also excited and they understand that this

isn't just a moment. This is what we've been talking about for such a long time, and I want us to continue to respect and build and honor those who are here, those who were here before, and those who are coming. And we need to establish that, yes, we have the foundation of being built from a very long-standing and existing professional league—but we are our own, you know? Leaning into that, especially for the future. □

CALM BEFORE STORM

Ahead of the new CBA, many free agents are looking for short-term contracts like Ogwumike's one-year deal with Seattle in 2024.



photograph by
JEFFERY A. SALTER

denim set by Öfüürë
jewelry by
Alexis Bittar



ONE
ONE
—WITH—

CANELO ÁLVAREZ

CANELO ÁLVAREZ didn't want to tell one of Mexico's hottest musicians how to produce a hit song, but he felt compelled to offer a few suggestions for building a lively crowd before a fight in Las Vegas. Input was encouraged and there was no overstepping, because this song was specifically made for one of Álvarez's ring walks, which tend to get just as much attention as his fights.

Álvarez, boxing's undisputed super middleweight champion, knew the original version wasn't quite right. The song needed to build anticipation and adrenaline. Luis R. Conriquez sent over a different take with violins and Álvarez loved it. He imagined the violins playing in a dark arena filled with nearly 18,000 spectators, the bows and strings taking their time to entice fans to scream "Canelo! Canelo!" before the focus turned to the four-division champion and the artist of the special ring-walk song.

Once the tweaks were made, the lyrics to "Martes 13" (Tuesday the 13th) did the rest.

With an eye
for drama and
ear for a good
track, the super
middleweight
champ has
shown that

MEXICAN MUSIC

and boxing are
a match made
in box-office
heaven

MARCH
2025
SI.COM

48

ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

by **GILBERTO MANZANO**



The song, which ended up being streamed on Spotify more than 72 million times by the end of 2024, starts by saying where Álvarez is proudly from—Guadalajara, Mexico—before reminding his opponents that fight night is bound to be an unlucky one. In Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries, Tuesday the 13th is similar to Friday the 13th in the United States. The song, which debuted last May before Álvarez's unanimous decision over Jaime Munguía, goes on to say good luck is for the mediocre.

The kind of preparation Álvarez put into the song shows why he remains the box-office king of boxing. In this sport, the spectacle and buildup are just as important as the skills needed to become a world champion. People have to care in order to sell fights and the 34-year-old has kept their attention as he approaches the back end of his career.

Álvarez has drawn interest by prioritizing Mexican representation on the biggest stage. It's not just the classic mariachi songs from Vicente Fernández blasting from arena speakers. Álvarez's collaborations with up-and-coming musicians have brought younger generations to the dying sport. He's had walkout performances with Fuerza Regida, Santa Fe Klan and many other emerging artists. Some have even benefited from the exposure that comes with singing the Mexican national anthem before an Álvarez megafight.

With the help of Álvarez's worldwide platform, many Mexican artists have crossed over into the U.S. mainstream. Fuerza Regida, Peso Pluma and Conriquez have landed songs on *Billboard's* Hot 100 list. No longer are these Spanish-speaking artists solely staying in their categories of Latin or regional Mexican music.

Álvarez has done what so many businesses in the U.S. have failed to do: appeal to the Latino audience, Mexican Americans who speak English first, but use Spanish with their parents and older relatives. Álvarez's brand and popularity increased after several interviews of him primarily speaking English went viral the past few years. His command of the language is far from perfect, but many appreciate the effort, not to mention the fact that he doesn't care what people think about his accent. Álvarez is worth millions and doesn't need to keep fighting, but he's found a way to be relatable in his late prime years.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED: 2024 was a good year for you, defeating and retaining your titles against Jaime Munguía and Edgar Berlanga. But it was also a good year for Mexican music. Peso Pluma, Fuerza Regida, Conriquez, Chino Pacas, Junior H and the list goes on. For you to see Mexican music explode in the U.S. and worldwide, how big was that for you?

CANELO ÁLVAREZ: It was huge for me, for all of Mexico, because the Mexican artists are competing with the biggest and best artists in the world. They're also very young, the Mexican musicians. I'm proud of all of them. I'm very

SMASH HITS

While Álvarez had wins over Munguía and Berlanga (below) last year, Latino artists like Conriquez (in green) and Peso Pluma (in purple) made their way to the U.S. charts.



proud of those who have accompanied me to the ring for my fights. Also, very proud to be Mexican and to represent Mexico.

SI: Do you make it a priority to give more attention to newer artists?

CA: Yes. I try to walk into the ring with those that I like, the music that I'm listening to, the right song I want to walk up to. For this occasion, [Conriquez] made me a special song, so we came out with that one. But these are mostly songs that I have listened to, and [the artists] add their twists to highlight me and the upcoming fight. But, yes, I do decide who will be walking out with me for each fight. Honestly, it's a priority for me to have these special walkouts because you feel proud and energized to be able to walk with these grand artists. People feel proud and excited to see the representation. I can't stress enough how big this is.

SI: Did you have an idea of how big Luis's song "Martes 13," was going to be?



CA: I knew that was going to be a very special song. I knew that was going to be a giant hit. I was involved in the process of making it. Luis sent me the first verse and I said, “No, that’s not right.” What I want when I’m heading toward the ring is to feel the emotions, [be] pumped up, to turn on the adrenaline. I want all of that turned on when I’m walking toward the ring. At the same time, if I’m hyped, then the entire crowd is also going to get hyped. The people are going to feel the energy and it’s going to be a hit song.

The words were excellent. [There were] a few minor changes here and there that were corrected. The words got even better, but when he sent me the other version, I told him, “I really like the violins.” He already had a song with violins. I told him, “I really like that because I imagine the entire arena, all of the lights off, and the violins begin to play, and then the focus is on us....Soy de GDL [I’m from Guadalajara].” I loved that. I knew the song was going to be very popular, but I didn’t imagine that he was

going to get his first gold record, for Luis R., with that song for “Martes 13.” I was very happy about that.

SI: Did Luis give you a credit for being a producer on the song?

CA: Oh, no. That’s all for Luis and those he works with. I got involved a little bit because it was used for my ring walk. It wasn’t my song. I just needed to feel motivated when the time came to head to the ring. That was it, but all the credit was for them. Luis has the ear and vision for what makes a hit song. When he sent the version that I liked, it didn’t require much from me. That song was already made. I knew that was the right one and on a different level.

SI: “Martes 13” became a heavily used song on social media as part of a trend where users recreated your ring walks. What did you think about that?


CA: It was impressive. I don’t really get much time to see what’s trending on social media during fight week and a few days after the fight. But then I got caught up. After seeing all the videos people made...I just wanted to interact, and then I followed the trend and made one with my brother [Ricardo Álvarez] and his coworkers at his taco shop, El Pastor Del Rica [in Zapopan]. I just wanted to join in on the fun and am very grateful that people enjoy what I share on fight night. This was for them to enjoy a grand event.

SI: Do you want the next Mexican boxing star to follow your lead by representing your country in various ways during fight night?

CA: I would love that. Records are meant to be broken. I would love for a Mexican boxer to do that and follow in these footsteps and to continue raising the bar from what we’ve already accomplished.

SI: You’ve already had numerous title bouts. Do you still fight because you want Mexico to continue getting this kind of exposure?

CA: Yes, of course. But it’s also because I love what I do. I still enjoy boxing. Obviously, everything has its limits, but right now I feel great and I feel like I’m in my prime. I still enjoy this sport, because when you talk about money, I don’t need to keep fighting anymore. But I want to keep growing in everything, including my heritage, and expanding historically while continuing to do what I love the most, which is boxing. So with all that, I’m going to continue moving forward. Hopefully the day that I hang up the gloves there’s someone else coming up, hopefully Mexican, to continue representing all of Mexico. □



ATHLETICISM COMES IN ALL SHAPES, SIZES AND ABILITIES.

Yet 48% of girls who drop out of sports are told they have the wrong body type.

It's time to inspire change—not just in how we see young athletes, but in how we speak to them. By praising girls' passion and commitment, not criticizing their body type, we can give them the support and confidence they need to thrive.

Together, we can keep her running, tackling, jumping, training harder and going bigger.

Let's keep her confident.
Let's keep her in the game.







//////
HONOR SMOKE



//////
CALYX WATKINS



//////
LIANA CHAN

//////
JA'NOR ELZIE



CARMEN WILKEY
//////



JULIA DINAR



NOELANI SPICER

PEPPER PERSLEY



KRIN BROWN

LALA SCHOLL



WRESTLER HONOR SMOKE

IN THE WINTER OF 2022, when Brittany Smoke asked her oldest daughter, Honor, which sport she was interested in playing, she was surprised to hear the then seven-year-old say wrestling.

**BY
MAGGIE MERTENS**





PHOTOGRAPHY BY
**TAYLOR
BALLANTYNE**

**FEATURED ON
THE COVER**



Brittany and her husband, Michael Smoke, both played basketball, along with most of their community in the Tonawanda Reservation in upstate New York.

But Honor, now 10 years old, was always jostling and playing around with her four siblings. At first, Brittany was a little apprehensive; she didn't know anything about the sport. And Honor and her younger sister, Scarlet, were the only girls there. But Honor was immediately sure of herself on the mat.

"Honor is a sponge," says her coach, Jason Chase. "She picks up everything really, really fast." Chase noticed immediately that Honor was naturally talented, and she had an amazing attitude. "Honor does everything with a smile on her face. She's one of the happiest athletes I've ever coached."

Three years later, Honor is now the New York girls state champion in her weight class, and wrestling is her favorite sport. She wrestles year-round with Chase, while also participating in basketball and cheerleading, where she's a flier and a tumbler and is working on mastering her roundoff back layout.

Even though girls wrestling is growing—the number of high school girls' teams quadrupled nationally over the past decade—Honor still generally trains with and competes against boys. And, often, she wins.

“If there’s a girls bracket, then I normally wrestle in that bracket, too,” she says. “But I normally wrestle in the boy’s bracket.” This doesn’t faze her one bit.

“She’s as tough as anyone in that room,” Chase says. “It doesn’t seem to faze her at all.”

One thing that makes Honor such an incredible athlete is her confidence: she’s never afraid to try new things and challenge herself. At a recent tournament, Chase noticed that Honor was maneuvering her opponent into a tilt position, which flips them onto their back, to get closer to a pin. At the break, Chase brought Honor to a mat off to the side and showed her how to complete the move. Back in her match, she immediately started hitting the tilt on her opponent.

Chase recalls hearing the opposing coach shout, “Stay away from the tilt! That’s her best move! Don’t let her hit that!” He could only laugh. “I had literally just shown it to her 30 seconds earlier.”

In 2023, Honor placed fifth in her age and weight bracket at the New York Wrestling Association for Youth (NYWAY) State Championships. But in 2024, she came back determined to win.

“This time, I was like, I gotta get first,” Honor says. Honor’s confidence and hard work paid off, as she claimed first place at the 2024 Championships.

“Being able to come into states this year with the confidence to do her best, even after a disappointing finish last year, is one of the most valuable things wrestling has taught her,” Brittany says.

“Mentally, it’s tough,” Brittany continues. “Wrestling teaches them not only to be physically fit and active but also how to stay mentally strong. It shows them they can overcome tough challenges and do hard things.”

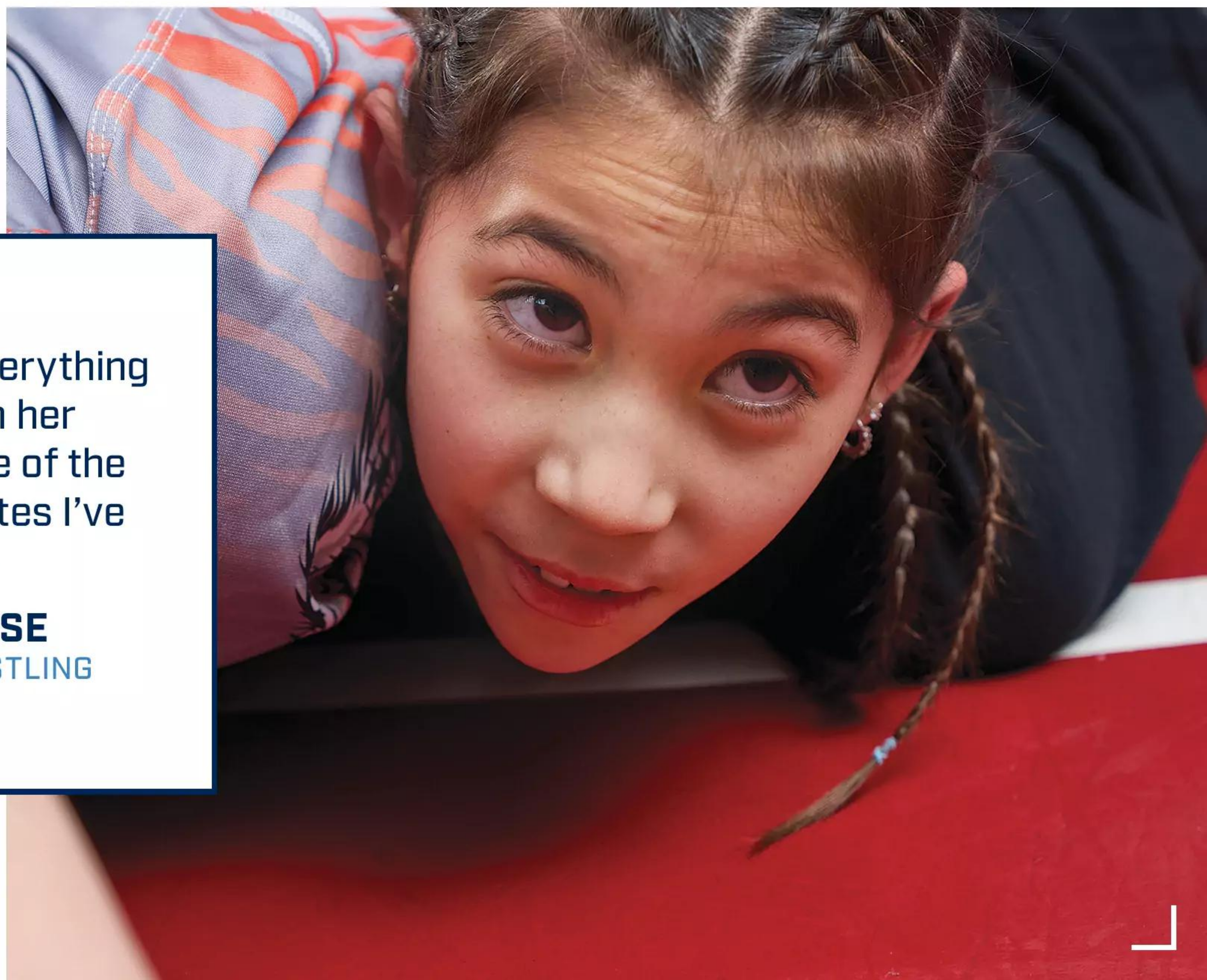
Honor’s tenacity as a wrestler also comes from the massive support she gets from home. “Wherever Honor wants to go wrestle, her parents travel all over to make that happen,” Chase said. “And wherever they go, they have a huge group of their family members that travel to support the girls.”

Brittany says the other members of their community on the Tonawanda Reservation are extremely proud of Honor and her younger sister, Scarlet. “Our community is very supportive of Honor and all of her achievements,” she says. “They’re always



Honor does everything with a smile on her face. She’s one of the happiest athletes I’ve ever coached.

—JASON CHASE
HONOR’S WRESTLING
COACH



rooting for her and asking when her next meet is.”

And Honor is building her own community in the wrestling world. She’s convinced one of her friends from school, Jenny, to join Chase’s team.

Honor’s two younger sisters—Scarlet, age seven, and Callie, age five—now wrestle, too. And Honor helps coach the “Little Scrappers” program for Callie and other four, five, and six-year olds in the program. As an “assistant coach,” she and Scarlet come to every practice to show the younger kids the different techniques.

“They’re such great examples of what a practice partner should look like,” Chase says.

“Having them in the room, there’s already somebody that the little kids can look up to.”

Honor plans to keep wrestling. Next year, when she starts middle school, she’ll seek out an opportunity on the school wrestling team for the first time, because she has big dreams. She was inspired by watching the Paris Olympics this summer, especially by Amit Elor, who won the gold medal for the United States in freestyle wrestling. “I want to go to the Olympics,” Honor says.

For now, though, she says she hopes other girls see that wrestling isn’t just a sport for boys.

“Because many girls have been doing it,” Honor says coolly. “I’ve been doing it, myself.”



PEPPER PERSLEY

BY
MAGGIE MERTENS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ERICK W. RASCO

WHEN PEPPER PERSLEY WAS SIX years old, she was frustrated. She had been doing a skills class for basketball for a couple of years at that point, but she still couldn't make a basket on the 10-foot rim. So when practice ended one day, she asked her dad, Christopher Persley, if she could stay after to keep trying. Pepper stood there, taking shot after shot after shot.

Christopher and one of her coaches stayed to watch, encouraging her. But after a while, Christopher told her that it was OK, she could try again next week. Pepper said no, she wanted to keep trying. Finally, after nearly an hour and a half, the basketball left six-year-old Pepper's fingertips and sailed up into the basket. No bounce, no air ball. "It was glorious," Christopher remembered. Pepper and her dad and her coach were all thrilled, jumping up and down to celebrate. "I think it was the most excited I'd ever been, up until that point," Pepper says.

Today, you could kind of call Pepper a sports nut. At 13, she plays basketball and softball, and recently earned her second-degree black belt in taekwondo. She grew up going to New York Liberty games; her first was at age two. Her parents have been a big influence: Jenelle played softball in college, and coaches Pepper's team today; Christopher was a middle school basketball coach for years and a track and field athlete in high school.



“

I definitely care what people think about me, but only the people that really matter: my parents, coaches, and teammates.

—PEPPER PERSLEY

Her natural curiosity about sports and her supportive parents have led to her finding an early career as a sports journalist. In 2020 she started her own podcast and YouTube channel, Dish With Pepper. She's been a sideline reporter and attended press conferences, and interviewed WNBA players from Diana Taurasi to A'ja Wilson. Interviewing her heroes has not only inspired her as an athlete, it's helped build Pepper's confidence both on and off the court.

But meeting the greats doesn't mean that everything has come easily to her as an athlete. In fact, last year, Pepper nearly quit basketball altogether.

"I had a coach that made it hard for me to have confidence in myself that I was ever going to be a good basketball player," she says. Pepper, Chris and Jenelle decided that she needed to leave that team and take a break. For a while, Chris worried she wouldn't go back to the sport at all, because her confidence was that low. But he encouraged her to keep up her practice on her own, to rediscover her love of basketball.

"It took her quite a bit of time to even get comfortable handling the ball again," he says. But by this past summer, she had rediscovered the spark. She told her parents she wanted to try to make the varsity team at her school. This winter, Pepper was part of a group of six girls, all eighth graders, who were asked to attend the high school team tryouts.

When two of her friends told her they weren't going to try out because they were too nervous, she gave them a pep talk. "To not take this opportunity, you'll feel worse," she told them. "I have so much faith in you that you'll make this team." Both of those friends are starters now for the high school junior varsity team. And Pepper is the starting point guard for the varsity team.

"Which is amazing, because I don't know if six-year-old me trying to make a shot on a 10-foot rim would ever have thought something like this would happen," Pepper says.

But Christopher says it's because of that tenacity of that six-year-old Pepper that she is where she is today. "She's just such an amazing teammate," he says. "She's the type



of kid who's willing to play tough, demanding positions because there isn't anyone else to step up and do that stuff. In basketball she would prefer to play [a different position,] but they need her at point guard and so she steps up. That's who she is. She'll step up."

When she plays for her softball team that means she's often playing catcher, an unpopular position in the hot summer months thanks to the heavy gear. And she's the one the team turns to when things are hard, like at a recent game when an opponent was hurling racially-charged insults at Pepper and some other members of her team. Pepper didn't get angry or go after anyone. She turned to her own team to make sure they were all O.K. and they were supported, Christopher says.

"There was Pepper, she was there for her teammates," he says. "I was blown away by that moment."

Whether she's interviewing her idols or playing in front of a crowd, Pepper faces far more scrutiny than your average 13 year old. But in her time as an athlete and a commentator, she's learned to tune out the noise and rely on her community for support.

"One thing I learned from basketball is to not worry about however many people are watching, whether that's 30 people who are sitting at a game or 10,000 people watching a broadcast. Who am I really making an impact on?" Pepper says. "I definitely care what people think about me, but only the people that really matter: my parents, coaches, and teammates."



KRIN

BY

ERIN STROUT

BROWN

LACROSSE STICKS IN HAND, a group of a dozen tween girls form a single-file line in the middle of a grassy playing field in Philadelphia, where their coach holds up a full-length mirror in front of them. Before launching into drills and conditioning exercises, each athlete steps up individually, stares at her reflection, and speaks her own daily affirmation into existence.

This is 13-year-old Krin Brown's favorite part of every practice. For three years, she's been looking herself in the eye and declaring, "I am intelligent. I am powerful. I am confident," she says.

"It's really helped me to believe all of that," Krin says.

Krin is a member of Eyekonz Sports, a Philly-based league founded by Jazmine Smith (a.k.a. "Coach Jaz") for ages 5-18 that aims to introduce lacrosse and field hockey—predominantly white sports—to athletes of color. The curriculum combines skill development with heavy emphasis on lessons that build self-esteem and teach girls how to cope with adversity on and off the field.

Developing that self-belief is critical, especially for a young girl who copes with Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis, as well as Amplified Pain Syndrome (AMPS). Whether she is sprinting around the lacrosse field or sitting in class at school, Krin is likely experiencing some degree



I am intelligent. I am powerful. I am confident.

—KRIN BROWN





of joint pain and stiffness—and it’s often intense. Movement, combined with other treatments like icing the joints and going to counseling to reduce anxiety or stress, can help alleviate some of the symptoms she experiences.

And sometimes, Krin, who plays attack, has learned, her contributions don’t always come in the form of scoring goals or making assists. On days when she is facing her own physical limitations, Brown knows it’s just as important to simply show up as a teammate. Being part of a close-knit community has proven a powerful motivation to keep playing lacrosse.

“Winning as a team and losing as a team, just being there for each other whenever we can, that’s just the best feeling ever,” Krin says.

Smith says Krin arrived at Eyekonz a shy, quiet 10-year-old, but has gradually become a reliable leader among her peers, supporting new members as they acclimate to the program. This team has not only given Krin the motivation to rise above challenges and stay in the game, it’s given her the confidence to encourage others to do the same.

“Krin will be the first person to help them gauge the process and tell them, ‘I’ve been in your shoes and I know it’s uncomfortable,’” Smith says. “It’s not pushy, it’s not judgy, it’s just helping them lean more into their self-love.”

But make no mistake, Brown is also a competitor who feels her best when she’s scoring points. Never one to let her condition hold her back, Krin has proven she is capable of incredible things both on and off the field. She hopes her friends can find their own strength in watching her develop hers.

“I feel like a lot of my friends are like, ‘Oh, I can’t. I can’t, I can’t,’” Krin says. “But I tell them, ‘You can do it.’”

She learned it at lacrosse: Success—in sports and life—begins with what we tell ourselves.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY

ERICK W. RASCO



NOELANI BY ERIN STROUT SPICER

ON THE TRACK, Noelani Spicer is free to test her limits. And often it's in those moments of competition and training that she recognizes how capable and confident she really is.

Spicer, 12, was born with spina bifida and cerebral palsy. She found adaptive sports early in life, joining a nonprofit group called Kinetic Kids at age five, which provides training in ambulatory and wheelchair track, as well as seated and standing field events. It didn't take long to realize that she had talent, setting age-group national records in eight events ranging from the 100 meters to the 1500 meters, as well as the discus and javelin. Noelani also competes in archery.

For as many accolades as Noelani has already accrued, the titles and trophies aren't necessarily what keeps her motivated, she says. Instead, it's the friendships she's made among teammates and even competitors from across the country.

"I just really like racing and being with my friends," Noelani says. "But mostly being with my friends, much, much more [than racing]."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
TAYLOR BALLANTYNE



Noelani's one of the first to celebrate the people she raced with. That's a unique talent, to be humble enough to recognize the other people around you, even if you beat them.

—**SCOTT LEBLANC**
NOELANI'S COACH

While the social aspect might be at the top of the reasons why Noelani thrives in track and field, her coach, Scott LeBlanc, says she still has an ability to “flip a switch” when it’s time to race, getting into a serious, sometimes intense mindset.

“She will celebrate her own accomplishments and yell and cheer when she crosses the finish line, but she’s one of the first to celebrate the people she raced with,” LeBlanc says. “That’s a unique talent, to be humble enough to recognize the other people around you, even if you beat them.”

Noelani’s father, Gregory Spicer, remembers when his daughter was born and doctors told him and his wife, Analisa, that “she’ll never do anything.” They refused to believe it—and they’ve never allowed their daughter to limit herself, either.

“I tell her, ‘Your wheels are your legs. You’re no different than other kids and you have things that they don’t have,’” Gregory says.

Noelani becomes emotional when she’s asked what she’s most proud that her body can do.

“I can try,” she says, in a whisper.

Analisa says that in many ways Noelani’s success on the track draws attention to her disabilities in a way that day-to-day life doesn’t, which can stir Noelani’s feelings when she talks about it. “She knows she has differences from other kids, but we’ve always raised her as a typical kid,” Analisa says.

During the off-season, Noelani has also discovered that strength and conditioning sessions have given her a new kind of self-belief. As she advances in weightlifting, she’s enjoyed showing off her new-found power to her mom.

“It highlights the strength in my upper body,” Noelani says.

Participation in sports has also helped Noelani navigate the challenges she faces



at school. When other kids are unkind, she doesn't let it bother her, Analisa says, because she knows she has a community of people in track and field who she can rely on.

"I think without sports Noelani wouldn't have that backbone of support that's needed to help maintain her confidence," Analisa says.

Ultimately, Noelani dreams of taking her speed to the highest level and becoming a Paralympian. She looks to 21-time Paralympic medalist Tatyana McFadden for inspiration to keep training toward that goal. The 35-year-old—who has also won 20 world championship medals and countless titles at major marathons including New York City and Chicago—was also born with spina bifida. McFadden's advocacy at her Maryland high school led to a state law that requires schools to provide equal physical education and athletic opportunities for students with disabilities.

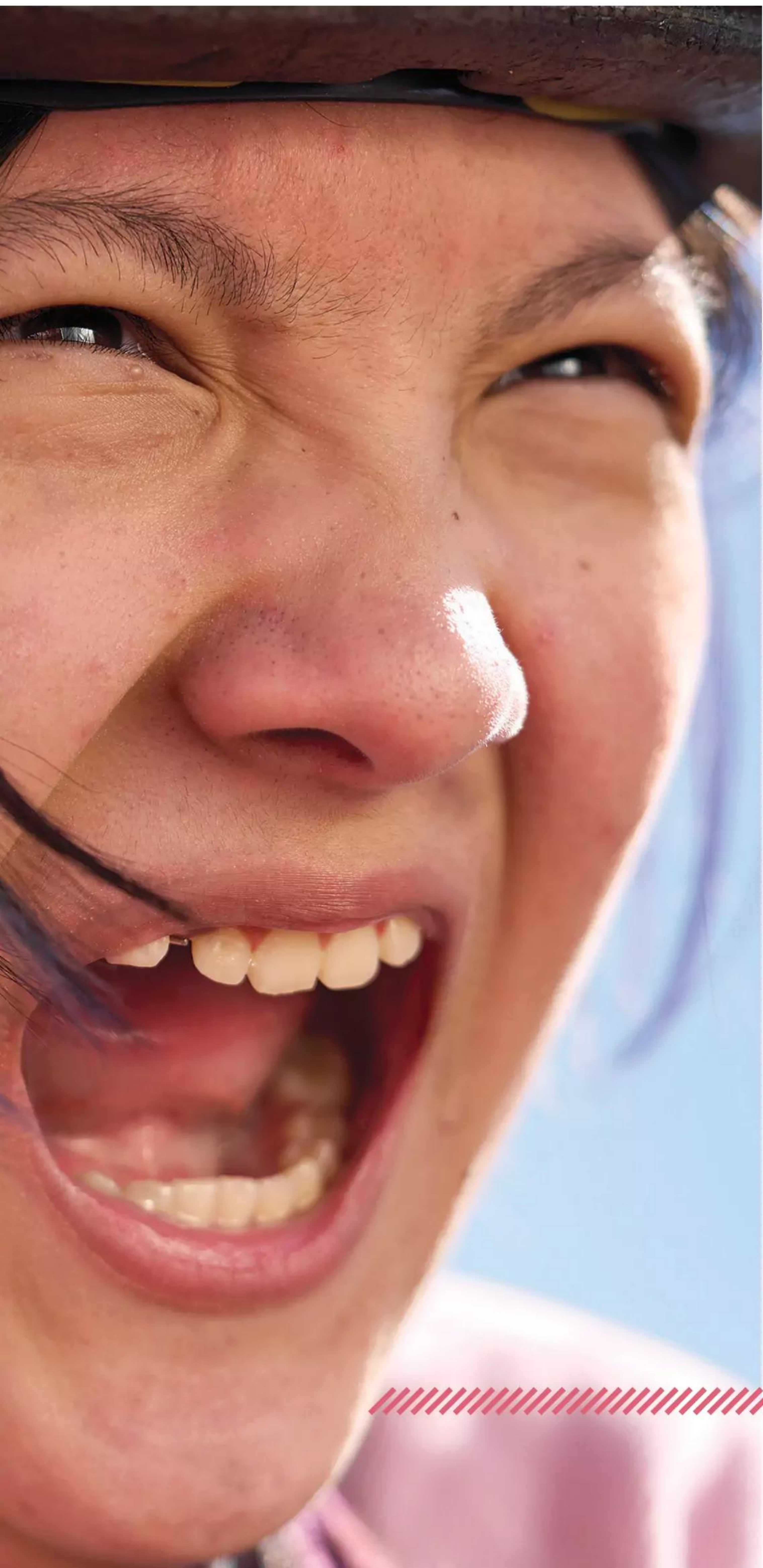
Access to adaptive youth sports is still limited, but with the support of her family, coaches, and Kinetic Kids, Noelani is able to travel from her hometown of San Antonio, Texas, to participate in competitions across the country. Currently she enjoys the sprints the most—"That's because she loves the limelight," LeBlanc says with a laugh—but she has plenty of time to specialize. For now, she's testing herself against athletes in different classifications. Noelani typically competes in the T33 classification for wheelchair athletes with cerebral palsy, but she's also won in the T54 classification for those with spina bifida—notable because T54 athletes have full upper mobility while Noelani has hemiplegia on her left side, making her upper body weaker than most of her competitors.

And every time she exceeds her expectations, Noelani raises the bar for herself.

"It makes me feel like I could do more," she says.

And that sentiment extends off the track, too. LeBlanc says that adaptive sports are about more than athletic goals and fast times—it's about learning to live as independently as possible, for as long as possible.

"If that takes her to the Paralympics, I'll be watching and cheering, but you can't live on that," he says. "What she'll live on is her ability to speak up for herself and do for herself—and those are the life skills she's learning through sports. It takes courage, but that's what life's all about."





PHOTOGRAPHY
BY
**ERICK W.
RASCO**

JULIA DINAR

BY
ERIN STROUT



THE SUMMER OF 2020 in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, was a tough one. The COVID-19 pandemic was raging through New York and kids had few opportunities to socialize or participate in many activities.

Julia Dinar's best friend, however, had discovered an intriguing group called Fencing in the Park, welcoming local youth for free lessons in an unfamiliar sport. Desperate to find her then-eight-year-old daughter—who lives with severe asthma—an outlet and a reason to get outdoors, Julia's mom, Alexa Encarnacion, took her to a session.

"When we first started this, I wanted Julia to be moving. It wasn't really about winning or anything like that," Encarnacion says. With extra-curriculars being so limited at the time, she was also excited for Julia to have opportunities to socialize, build community, and form connections with coaches and mentors.

As it turned out, the group was founded and directed by fencer Nzingha Prescod, a two-time Olympian, world champion and four-time senior world medalist. She also became the first Black woman to win an individual medal at the Senior World Championships when she claimed bronze in 2015. But beyond her accolades, Prescod had also grown up in

the neighborhood and was on a mission to create no-cost opportunities in underserved areas of the city. The initiative was so successful that in 2021, she created the Prescod Institute for Sport, Teamwork and Education (PISTE), providing students with pathways to "become champions, leaders, and scholars through fencing."

Julia has been hooked on fencing ever since, practicing with PISTE four times a week and competing up to three times a month. That chance encounter in the park has proven life-changing, she says, and allowed her to find confidence in herself and what her body can do.

"[Prescod] started in the same situation as me and she became an Olympian," Julia says. "That encourages me. It shows me that people from my background can achieve amazing things, too."

Fencing is not the easiest sport to master. It takes quick, strategic thinking, agility, and intense focus. That's exactly why Julia loves it, "I like that it challenges me mentally and physically," she says. "You have to think tactically and be one step ahead of your opponent, but then also you have to use every last bit of your strength to win a bout."

Julia's first medal came at a local competition two years after she started—it took a lot of patience and hard work to see that kind of result. Still, Julia gives credit to her mom for helping her keep fencing fun, encouraging her to do her best but not get too upset when her performance falls short of expectations.

Fencing has become more than a sport for Julia. Through PITSE, Julia has found a role model, supportive community, and most importantly, a boost in her confidence. Julia wishes other girls her age also gave fencing—or other sports—a chance. Her advice for those who don't see themselves as an athlete? Don't let other people's opinions hold you back from finding a sport you love.

"For girls who might not feel confident in sports because of body image, I would say just because your body doesn't fit into the image of what somebody in your sport is supposed to look like, it doesn't mean you're not capable of great things," she says.

A big "secret" of Julia's success is that her and her mom keep gratitude at the center of their fencing life. They repeatedly voice appreciation for the people who introduced them to PISTE, the coaches and for the families who have created a needed support network and welcoming community. Fencing has also opened doors to unique opportunities for Julia, like appearing on the *Kelly Clarkson Show*, traveling to Paris for a youth fencing event ahead of the 2024 Summer Games, and even ringing the bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

Those experiences are what create the consistency and connection to coaches and peers that Prescod believes help girls stick through the inevitable ups and downs of youth sports. "When they build great memories together, that's what matters, especially when they're young," Prescod says.

At age 13, Julia already sees that her dedication to fencing may become a means



Just because your body doesn't fit into the image of what somebody in your sport is supposed to look like, it doesn't mean you're not capable of great things.

—JULIA DINAR

to her life's aspirations—perhaps a college scholarship that could, eventually, lead her to medical school. Though she intends to keep competing "as long as my body allows me," she says the ultimate dream is to become a pediatrician. PISTE collects report cards from the athletes and Prescod has noticed, "Julia's grades have just gone up and up and up...I'm hoping being part of PISTE is continuing to influence her positively, not only in fencing and sport, but academically."

Encarnacion believes that Julia's participation in fencing is nothing short of transformative—it has shown her daughter that, no matter what her circumstances are, she can push past perceived boundaries and obstacles to get where she wants to go.

"She can love her body, be healthy, and be the best version of herself," Encarnacion says. "That's all I want from her—to be the best version of herself."

A photograph of an elderly Black woman, Mary Princess, standing on a tennis court. She is wearing a long, dark blue or black robe with puffed sleeves and a large, ornate gold necklace with red and white beads. Her arms are outstretched to the sides. The background shows a tennis court with a green and brown surface and a chain-link fence. The text "BEAUTY NEVER GETS OLD" is overlaid in large, white, serif capital letters.

BEAUTY NEVER GETS OLD

Mary Princess
Beauty Bar User
SINCE 1989



JA'NOR BY ERIN STROUT ELZIE

THREE YEARS AGO, Ja'Nor Elzie's mom took her to cheerleading sign ups near their home in Slidell, Louisiana. That day, registration didn't go as planned.

Ja'Nor watched as her brother joined the football team. And she wondered, *Why not me?*

When Janor asked her mother, Jozette Thomas, about football, she looked around at all the boys taking to the playing field and wasn't sure, at first, what to do.

"I was terrified, honestly, because I'm like, *There aren't any little girls on the team,*" Thomas says. "I had to step outside of what I wanted. And she's just really fallen in love with the sport."

Ja'Nor is the only girl on her football and basketball teams. And at 12 years old, she's learned to embrace her individuality



My body doesn't give up on me. As long as I have a strong mindset, I know my body can help me through anything.

—JA'NOR ELZIE



PHOTOGRAPHY
BY

JEFFERY A.
SALTER

and prove herself as a valuable member of the squad. Her favorite position on the court is anywhere on defense. Ja'Nor wants to be the one to make sure her teammates are set up for success.

"All in all, my teammates are very supportive," Ja'Nor says. "It can be very hard because some of the boys are not used to playing against girls, so they can be a little rough. But at this point, I've gotten used to it."

The second-oldest in a line of six siblings, Ja'Nor feels like her participation in sports sets a good example for her three younger sisters. She likes to show them that she can be strong on the field of play and still like to wear a dress or put on some lip gloss after the game.



Who has she learned this from? Her favorite players in the WNBA, Angel Reese and Caitlin Clark, she says. Ja'Nor has a special connection to Reese, who played at LSU—located about 90 minutes away from her hometown—before she was drafted by the Chicago Sky in 2024. “I love how she’s just there and she’s supportive and very confident in what she does,” Ja'Nor says. “She’s not going to let anybody walk over her.”

On the track, Ja'Nor has taken a liking to the longer distances, and she loves that her “aunties, uncles, siblings, and parents” are all cheering her on at the finish line. It’s this kind of support, from her family, friends and teammates, that has given her the confidence to overcome any challenge.

As an athlete who also deals with asthma, Ja'Nor is proud that she’s learned how to work with her body to achieve her goals. “My body doesn’t give up on me,” she says. “As long as I have a strong mindset, I know my body can help me through anything, like going faster, or keeping a steady pace, or stopping myself when I need to take a little break.”

Thomas is always concerned about her daughter’s ability to breathe while she’s competing, but she’s also learned that Ja'Nor rarely allows her condition to stop her from doing her best.

“Being asthmatic, being the only girl on the team—oftentimes all of those things can work as discouragement,” Thomas says. “But instead, she hasn’t let anything stand in the way of what she wants to do.”



LIANA CHAN

BY
MAGGIE MERTENS



I was scared at first she would get banged around [playing hockey], but she actually doesn't really let it get to her.

—**LAWRENCE CHAN**
LIANA'S DAD

LIANA CHAN LOVES letting her imagination run wild. At her home in the Bronx, you'll find her reading fantasy books about dragons and other mythical creatures, crocheting and drawing for long periods of time. Being so creative might be what drew her to play ice hockey, too. It's not exactly a common sport for kids in the Bronx, but when she first started taking hockey lessons at the local Boys & Girls Club, being on the ice was its own kind of magic.

Liana says practicing falls was when she first fell in love with the sport. "During one of the practices, we were told to skate out into the middle of the ice, and then would purposely fall on our stomachs into a Superman pose," Liana says. "It didn't hurt, and you just were sliding all over. It was so fun."

Liana, now 11, didn't even know how to ice skate when she first started playing hockey two years ago, but her coaches at the Boys & Girls Club—a program supported by the NHL's New York Rangers—helped her and the other kids learn quickly. Liana says she

felt confident on the ice because she knew that she could fall down and it wouldn't hurt because of all the special gear. Now, her favorite part of practice every Wednesday and Saturday is the first moment she steps on the ice, skating around the rink while warming up. She loves the feeling she gets gliding around as fast as she can. At that moment, Liana says, she feels free.

"It's the best feeling ever," she says.

Liana's parents have always encouraged her to try new sports. For four years she was on a swim team, and she's tried horseback riding, baseball, basketball and tennis. Her older brother ran cross country and her sister swam too. So when Liana and her younger brother, Zachary, were both in-



PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ERICK W. RASCO

terested in hockey, their mom, Katie Chan, encouraged them. She figured, at the very least, they would learn how to ice skate, something she still isn't comfortable doing as an adult. At first, Katie was a little nervous though.

"I was kind of worried about her playing, about whether she could tough it out," she says, especially because Liana is smaller in stature than others her age.

But as it turns out, Liana loves the sport. In fact, this year, she decided to forego swimming to focus on hockey, because she feels so passionate about it. Liana's dad, Lawrence, says he's noticed a difference in his daughter since she started playing hockey. While she's

always been a great student, a good listener and kind to her friends and family, hockey has made her tougher. Getting back up after a fall has given Liana a new kind of confidence: nothing can keep her down.

"I'm so proud that she's persevered at this sport that's predominantly male," Lawrence says. "I was scared at first she would get banged around, but she actually doesn't really let it get to her. She recovers quickly."

Even though no one in the family used to watch hockey, they've since been able to go to Rangers games and meet some players, like current defensemen K'Andre Miller and former star Stéphane Matteau. Liana says she likes to see the players on the ice to get inspiration for new skills to learn. She hopes to skate faster as she plays more hockey, too. Lawrence says that when they go skating as a family now, "She's skating circles around me."

Liana doesn't play on a team yet, but they do scrimmage at the Boys & Girls Club program, and when they do, she likes to play on the wing.

"I like being near the puck and chasing it down," she says with a small smile. Lawrence adds that after she scores, she always celebrates with a cheer, and finds her parents in the crowd, waving to them to let them know, "I did it! I scored!"

And even though she plays with mostly boys, she says, being one of the only girls out there has never bothered her.

"It doesn't matter who plays hockey, it's just a sport," she says. For Liana, it's the sport that's made her feel most happy, confident and strong.



LET
YOUR
BODY

body



New



Try Dove
Whole Body Deo

72h odor control
+
skin care
everywhere



CARMEN WILKEY

BY
MAGGIE MERTENS

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY
KOHJIRO
KINNO

AS A LITTLE GIRL, Carmen Wilkey was so active that she often had to go back to her prosthetist before she was scheduled in order to replace the foot of her prosthetic leg, because it would wear out early. Carmen did dance and gymnastics classes, and ran around with her friends and classmates on the playground and in PE. She was an amputee, but she never let it slow her down.

Carmen's left leg was amputated below the knee when she was 14 months old because she was born with Fibular Hemimelia, meaning she lacked a left fibula, ankle bone and pinky toe. The best outcomes for this diagnosis are seen with amputation at a young age.

Every year on her first day of school, Carmen, now 12, brings in her prosthetic legs to show her whole class what they are and how they work, so no one thinks her amputation is something she's ashamed of.

When she was 9, Carmen's prosthetist asked if she'd like to attend a clinic for other people learning to run in prosthetics, put on by the Challenged Athletes Foundation, and she was eager to give it a try. As soon as she tried

out running on the track, she was hooked. "I'd never been to anything like that before, it was a lot of fun meeting new people, and learning the different techniques," she says.

The clinic also introduced Carmen's parents, Michael and Bekah Wilkey, to many other families of amputees, all with information to share about the sports available for kids like Carmen and how to get involved. That fall, they found an organization that helped match kids with running blades. The first time Carmen tried her blade, she was anxious to see how it would change her game.

"It was extremely exciting, but also nerve-wracking because I've never been on a leg like that before," Carmen says. "But I've seen so many people run on these kinds of legs so I really wanted to try it to see if I would be super fast." As soon as she got the blade on a track, Michael says, "She took off."

The next summer she started to compete in track and field meets hosted by Move United. At the Endeavor Games in Edmond, Okla., in June 2022, Carmen set a national record for her age group, gender and disability

classification in the 60-meter race, finishing in 13.93 seconds. Her performance qualified her for Junior Nationals in Denver, Colo., the following month. There, she set two more national records, in discus, with a 45' 4.5" throw, and long jump, with a 9' 7" jump. Now in the U-14 division, Carmen competes in the shot put, discus, long jump, javelin, 100-meter and 200-meter races.

But adaptive competitions are only in the summer, and they usually require travel. This spring, however, Carmen will be able to join her school team for the first time, at Severance Middle School, and attend team practices and regular meets, competing alongside—and against—able-bodied athletes.

Just like all kids, Carmen picks up some things quickly, and others she has to work on.

Three years ago, Carmen attended a snowboarding camp with Paralympic snowboarding gold medalist Noah Elliott, and just as with track and field, she immediately got the hang of it. She was riding blues, or the intermediate slopes, on her first day. Michael, an avid snowboarder, takes her to ride regularly every winter near their Colorado home.

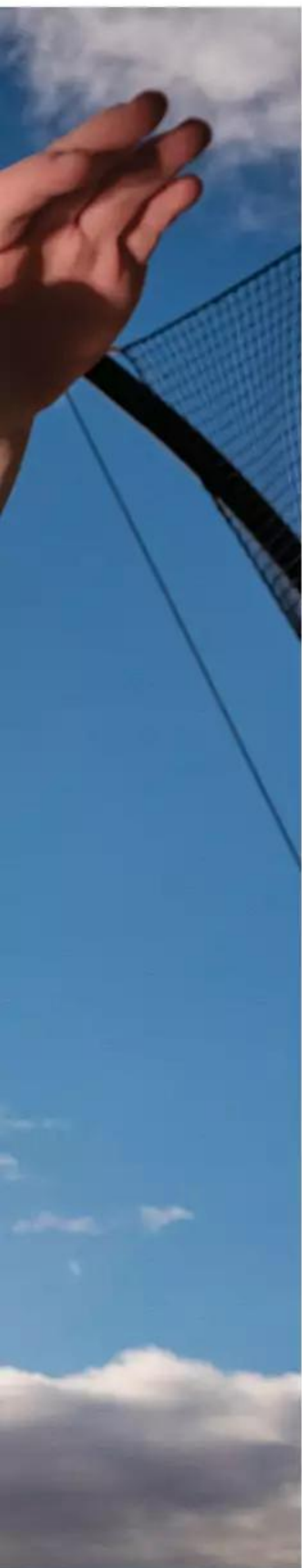
But this fall, when she joined her school's swim team, success wasn't as smooth. When she was learning breaststroke, in particular, she remembers telling her coach she didn't know how to make it work because, "I don't have two feet." Bekah, Carmen's mom, says, "She was ready to be done with it." But Carmen took some time to remember that she actually really enjoys swimming, and instead of quitting, she asked her coaches if they could look into some adaptive breaststroke options for her.

"She went back each meet," Bekah says. "And I know it was hard for her but she improved continuously until the end of the season."

Carmen has loved being part of the adaptive sports community because she's met so many other athletes like her that inspire her. She has one older friend she's made, for instance.

"I look up to her a lot because she's very strong and determined and she does a lot of





things that are super cool. She just exudes confidence.” Carmen says, “Meeting all these other para-athletes has really put in perspective what an athlete can look like, and that they come in all different shapes and sizes.”

Having a supportive community of diverse athletes has inspired Carmen to continuously challenge herself as an athlete, building body confidence with every step forward. “Sometimes I’ll think, ‘Oh, I can’t do this thing,’” Carmen admits. “And then I prove myself wrong. And then I’ll think ‘But I definitely can’t do this thing,’ and then I prove myself wrong again.”

She has a dream of becoming a Paralympian two-times over: competing in the Summer Games in track and field, and in the Winter Games as a snowboarder. Some might call it too big of a goal, but Carmen’s used to proving people wrong.



Meeting all these other para-athletes has really put in perspective what an athlete can look like, and that they come in all different shapes and sizes.

—CARMEN WILKEY





LALA SCHOLL

BY
MAGGIE MERTENS

LALA SCHOLL, 12, WAS ALWAYS FAST—the fastest kid in her class—and proud of it. But it wasn't until five years ago, during a family vacation to Atlanta, that she discovered how using her speed could invigorate her body and uplift her spirits.

At the time, Lala, then seven, joined a soccer practice with one of the family's friends. She was immediately hooked. "It looked like she was really having so much fun," recalls her mom, Kaori.

When they got home from the vacation, Lala's father, Owen, who had been an avid athlete growing up, began teaching her the basics of soccer. Before long, Lala started organizing her own pickup soccer games, inviting friends and even strangers to play. At recess, she gathered as many kids as possible to join in. When she asked about playing for her elementary school's soccer team, she learned there was only a boys' team— and she joined without hesitation.

Immediately, Lala found her speed made her a good fit as a forward and shooting gave her a rush. When she remembers one of her first goals, her eyes sparkle. "A kid named Everett on my team passed it to me, and then I ran and scored," she says.

This year, at her new middle school, things got more competitive. There were multiple girls' soccer teams, and Lala had to try out.

"They did some drills that I didn't really understand," she admits. Still, her speed and ball-handling skills, honed through those countless pick-up games, earned her a spot on the team.

Lala has been able to keep her confidence on a more competitive team thanks to a network of support and a genuine love for the game. Her mother Kaori says she's most proud of her daughter continuing on with soccer this year even though she's not the best one on the field anymore. "On her old teams, she was always the top skills player, but this team was different, and she felt like she wasn't as good. But I'm so proud of her for sticking with it."

The middle school team has been a significant step up from the elementary school and playground games Lala was used to, but her skills—and her circle of friends—have grown quickly.

Lala says, "Playing soccer anywhere, anytime, and putting my skills on display whether I'm confident or still learning, has helped me take other risks, too". This year she also tried out for the school musical, *Finding Nemo*, and had a few different parts.

Was she nervous performing in front of 200 people? "No," she says. Lala thrives in the spotlight, whether it's on the soccer field or the stage.



Playing soccer
anywhere, anytime,
and putting my skills
on display whether
I'm confident or still
learning, has helped me
take other risks, too.

— LALA SCHOLL



PHOTOGRAPHY
BY

JEFFERY A.
SALTER

CALYX WATKINS

BY
ERIN STROUT

SHE USED TO CALL IT “SYRUP SEASON.”

When Calyx Watkins played offensive line(wo)man for her community youth football team, her favorite part of the game was “pancaking” her opponents.

“You put them on their butt. That’s a pancake,” she says, smiling. “Then pour some syrup on them. That’s where we got that—me and my brother.”

Calyx started playing football in Detroit at six years old. Her father, who died in 2021, was her coach. Her older brother, Ja’Kobe Watkins, was a rising star who went on to play at Southeast Missouri State University, and her biggest fan and mentor. She was surrounded by a game dominated by boys and men, yet she still yearned to play. So she did—and it proved meaningful in many ways.

“Me and my brother both won championships the same year we lost our dad,” Calyx says. “We dedicated that to him.”

But today, Calyx wistfully refers to football in the past tense. Now in her first year of high school, she’s moved on to basketball. Calyx loves her new sport—and she has already made the varsity squad—but wishes she could still participate on the football team. Unfortunately as she grew older, the sport

became increasingly difficult to navigate. The logistics, such as needing her own hotel room and a chaperone during travel, coupled with the physical discrepancies between herself and the boys, made playing unsafe.

“She’s still working real hard,” Ja’Kobe says. “I’m glad she’s off the football field—I know how violent it can get. I just take the responsibility of trying to develop her and make sure she’s well off to go to college. I know it is hard work, but she can do it.”

For Calyx, not having an athletic outlet was never an option. She enjoys physical activity and competition too much. Her mom, Alana Freeman-Watkins, who played basketball at Grambling State University in Louisiana, encouraged her to try basketball instead.

Watching Calyx bring her competitive spirit and willingness to develop new skills on the court has been gratifying, Freeman-Watkins says. And it’s also become an opportunity to form important bonds with new teammates, which is no small consideration for teens. After so many years as the only girl on her team, Calyx has found the girls’ basketball culture welcoming and uplifting.

“Her basketball team is definitely a sisterhood...it empowers them in a way, if they’re





Never let somebody
bring down your
confidence.

—CALYX WATKINS

insecure in the school setting they can get out on the court, display their skill set and be in a different friend group,” Freeman-Watkins says.

Calyx may have left “Syrup Season” behind for now, but she understands that the strength she built in football transfers to basketball, too, and she’s enjoyed learning what it takes to win an entirely different kind of game. As a power forward, Calyx rebounds, defends, and yes, she shoots and scores, too, already visualizing recruitment to the powerhouse program at Louisiana State University and getting drafted to the WNBA.

“I love how you got to keep running down the court. It’s aggressive,” Calyx says. “I just love everything about it and I’m starting to learn more from my mama and watching LSU games.”

If those hoop dreams don’t come through, however, never fear, Calyx has a couple of backup plans: women’s football (she counts Odessa Jenkins, founder of the Women’s Football Tackle & Flag League, as one of the athletes she most looks up to) or medical school. Maybe both? It seems nothing will stop a girl whose greatest joy is a well-executed pancake.

“Never let somebody bring down your confidence,” she says. “Just don’t give up on yourself... believe in what you want to do.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY

JEFFERY A. SALTER





BY
CONDOR ORR

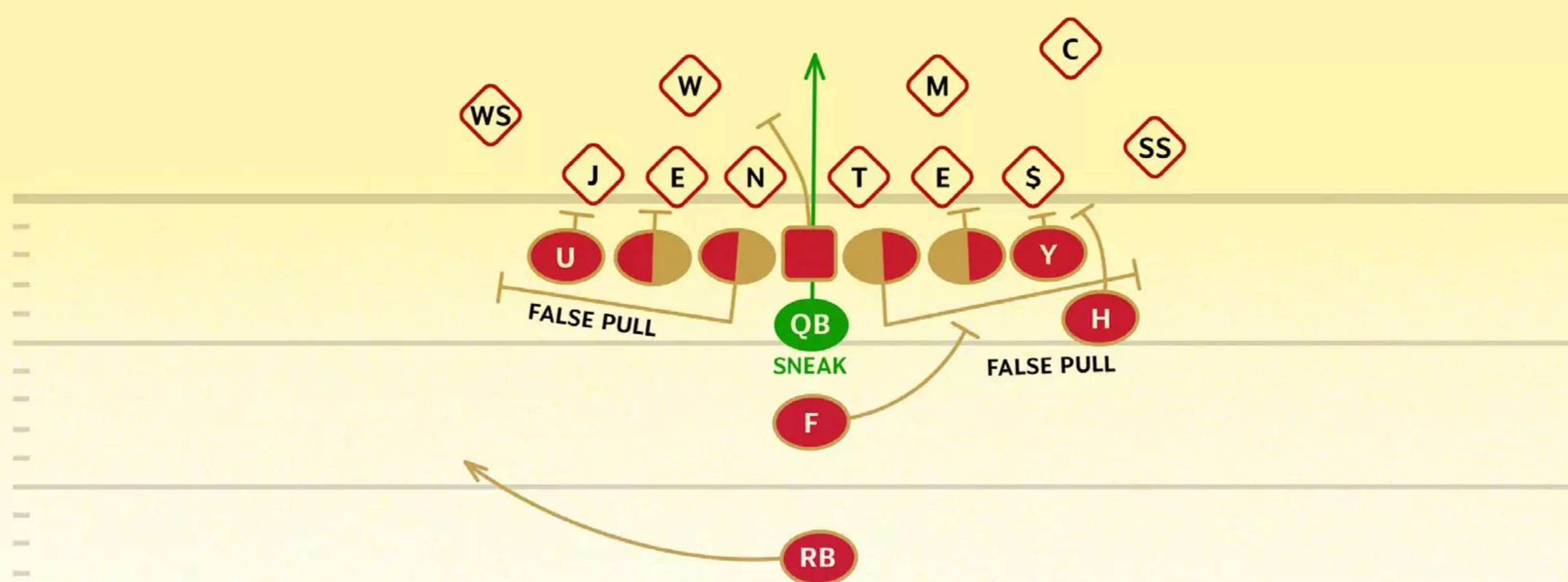
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
DAVIDE
BARCO

SUCKER

Why bother
with the
Tush Push when
you can call a
play that forces
the defense to
**PART LIKE
THE RED SEA**
and allows a
quarterback to
take a leisurely
stroll into
the end zone?

SENSE





With 10:34 to play in the third quarter of a Week 7 game between the Chiefs and the 49ers, San Francisco's Brock Purdy settled under center with his offense on the Kansas City 1-yard line. Purdy tapped his helmet, which caused fullback Kyle Juszczyk to also tap his helmet, likely to confirm the play to running back Jordan Mason was still on. The 49ers had their backs in the I-formation, with one tight end to the left and two to the right.

Most Chiefs defenders looked like track runners at the starting line of the 100 meters. Their legs were twitching and all six down linemen were rocking up onto their fingers in preparation for a short-range collision to try to prevent San Francisco from pulling within a point.

Steve Spagnuolo, arguably the most vaunted coordinator in NFL history, was calling the K.C. defense against 49ers head coach Kyle Shanahan, one of the league's most innovative offensive play-callers. Eight months earlier the coaches had faced off in the Super Bowl for the second time.

When the ball was snapped, though, there was no massive pileup, no brilliant defensive scheme to offset a beautifully drawn-up play. Purdy simply walked into the end zone behind his center, virtually untouched and—I say this after watching the TD countless times after it was highlighted on the X account of play-design guru Dan Casey—seemingly before many of the Chiefs' players knew the play was over.

My obsession with this moment began with its aesthetic. It's like watching a robbery in broad daylight with no arrest. It's like watching an ocean part for someone to simply walk through. There are plenty of plays in the NFL where someone scores untouched, even at the goal line, such as when a QB runs a bootleg. But not from the 1-yard line on a QB run

(or stroll, in this case) up the middle. This is literally one of the most crowded spaces in all of sports, up there with a rugby scrum or a contested rebound with time expiring.

My obsession led to a thesis: that Shanahan had invented the anti-Tush Push. Instead of using all of his team's heft to smash the quarterback into the end zone like one would mash a stuck remote control button, the 49ers utilized some window dressing to make the play look like one thing before sneaking Purdy in through the front door. Why risk your QB being crushed under a ton of humanity?

But after showing the play to coaches, it became clear that the reality is far more interesting and goes deeper than a Reddit wormhole on frying pan toxins. It's a window into how thorough a team's preparation needs to be every week. It's a window into the do-or-die nature of goal-line football. And ultimately, it's a window into just how hard it is to gain one yard in the NFL. (As an added bonus, it also ties in with a nearly quarter-century-old accusation tied to Spygate.)

This is the story of my favorite one-yard play, and how it evolved from a supposedly drawn-up-on-the-sideline middle finger into a modern-day social media showstopper that made one Ivy League coordinator tell his wife days before he called it: "If we hit this, it's going to go viral."

Chapter 1

OUTCHARGE

SOME OF the best coaches are the easiest to prepare for, in theory, because they have an established library of successful practices. Spagnuolo, when facing teams that tend to run to the outside, has a habit of lining up his defensive tackles over the guards and “outcharging” them. An outcharge is a common defensive maneuver in which a defensive tackle shoots outward in an attempt to choke out a wide run. A linebacker typically fills the gap left by the tackles, which sometimes puts him in position to make a huge play.

This practice is especially useful in goal-line situations because, as one coach interviewed for this story says, those scenarios are often like a soccer penalty kick. A goalkeeper, like the defense, knows their back is against the wall and the only way to improve the odds is to make a calculated guess.

Keepers tend to cheat to one side to gain an advantage, not unlike the one Spagnuolo is trying to get his tackles. Guessing wrong and you allow a short touchdown run that was almost inevitable anyway.

In a 2023 game, Cincinnati was facing a fourth-and-1 on the Chiefs’ 6-yard line. Spagnuolo had his defensive tackles outcharge, and the Bengals’ center and right guard dove after Chiefs nose tackle Mike Pennel. The machinations of the scheme left the middle of the offensive line so exposed that linebacker Willie Gay Jr. was able to walk into the backfield and wrap his arms around Joe Mixon just as the running back took the handoff.

What’s difficult for opposing play-callers, however, is that Spagnuolo doesn’t *always* do this against outside rushing teams. Had the Niners looked at Kansas City’s track record, they would’ve seen that in the 2023 regular season the Chiefs were in 21 total red-zone situations in which the offense needed one or two yards for a first down or a

**IT’S LIKE WATCHING A ROBBERY IN BROAD DAYLIGHT.
THERE ARE PLENTY OF PLAYS IN THE NFL WHERE SOMEONE SCORES UNTOUCHED.
BUT NOT FROM THE 1-YARD LINE ON A QUARTERBACK RUN UP THE MIDDLE.**



touchdown, according to NFL Pro. When facing the Jets, Kansas City had a defensive tackle who was partially lined up over the center. (New York ran a play-action pass to tight end C.J. Uzomah for a touchdown.) A few weeks later, against the Packers in a nearly identical situation, the Chiefs' tackles *did* run outcharge. (Green Bay ran a play-action pass to tight end Ben Sims for a touchdown.)

Further complicating matters, K.C. has one of the best defensive tackles of the last decade in Chris Jones, whose reaction off the ball is so fast that it's sometimes hard to tell whether he is outcharging or simply has a great read on the play.

Regardless, it was a near certainty that outcharge was going to be in Spagnuolo's arsenal against the 49ers in October. Shanahan repopularized the outside-zone system first made famous by his father, Mike, and legendary offensive line coach Alex Gibbs. In '23, only one team averaged more yards running the ball to the outside of their left tackle than the 49ers.

Shanahan would be ready to counter.

Chapter 2

THE CHESS MATCH AND THE REVEAL

IN A 2020 GAME between the Chiefs and the Panthers, Carolina QB Teddy Bridgewater walked to the line and uttered something just as Chiefs linebacker Damien Wilson started to rock toward the line of scrimmage.

Some coaches who watched the play speculated that Bridgewater was "canning" another play call and checking to a run because he had seen something to make him believe Kansas City was going to outcharge. A linebacker moving forward is one of the major indicators that an outcharge is coming.

Wilson had to fill the gap left by the defensive tackles, and inching forward shortened the distance he had to travel. Bridgewater didn't run a sneak but instead checked to a running play that went to the same gap and exposed the same weak point. Carolina's Christian McCaffrey then walked the ball into the end zone.

This little moment underscores the psychological chess match that is happening on countless levels simply for the right to lay claim to a few inches of grass. Consider:

- **The coaches.** Spagnuolo is betting that Shanahan is running to the outside. Shanahan sends in his quarterback with two plays and relies on him to pick up on a cue that would help him decide whether to run to the outside or sneak it up the middle.



- **The guys in the trenches.** In this situation, linemen are often coached to simply barrel forward with reckless abandon. Coaches are often not concerned with offside flag at the 1- or 2-yard line because it's only a half-the-distance penalty. This hair-on-fire attitude has to be balanced with near-perfect alignment. Any variance from the way the linemen would typically line up or adjust the distance between one another is a silent indicator of what's to come. (That was driven home in a 2019 game, when New England's Tom Brady noticed that, unlike on a previous goal-line snap, the Dolphins left the center uncovered and put more space between their interior linemen who were stationed farther down the line of scrimmage. He then scored on a sneak.)

Think about the difference for the offensive linemen who, while certainly worrying about jumping offside, don't have to be the least bit concerned about giving away what they're going to do because it's all part of the subterfuge.

- **The linebackers.** Kansas City's Drue Tranquill was in the same position Wilson was four years ago. Inching forward might indicate outcharge, but he had to get closer to the line because he was farther away from the ball than the offense

had to travel to score. *Not* inching forward would have given up valuable turf and made him look lazy and flat-footed on film. Tranquill ended up, like Wilson, rocking forward.

Just as Purdy snapped the ball, both of San Francisco's guards "pulled"—or sprinted toward their respective sidelines—in order to block outside defenders. Juszcyk followed the pulling guard to the right and Mason followed the pulling guard to the left. All of these maneuvers were visual cues to Kansas City's defenders that they had guessed correctly on the outside run. Both interior defensive tackles, Pennel and Derrick Nnadi, missed ahead.

This left Purdy, center Jake Brendel and Tranquill alone in vast space. As Purdy tucked the ball into his arm like a cumbersome briefcase and strolled forward, Pennel and Nnadi turned around with perfect comedic timing, looking like the burglars from *Home Alone*, bursting through a door only to find a can of paint swinging toward their heads.

Shanahan, though, cannot lay claim to this play on his own. Like many of the best calls, this particular sneak was created in a moment of hopelessness by a coach who felt his back up against the wall.

a front-page retraction. Bill Belichick denied taping the walkthrough in '08. "In my entire coaching career, I've never seen another team's practice film prior to playing that team," he told *The Boston Globe*. "I have never authorized, or heard of, or even seen in any way, shape or form any other team's walkthrough. We don't even film our own. We don't even want to see ourselves do anything, that's the pace that it's at. Regardless, I've never been a part of that."

So what does this have to do with a quarterback sneak? Well, according to Mike Martz, a great deal, apparently. Martz, the Rams' head coach at the time, claims to have been the first to utilize this specific sneak in a game. But he had never run the play with Kurt Warner, his starting quarterback in the Super Bowl.

Martz says: "We hadn't run it in such a long time that, by the time we'd gotten to the Super Bowl, since [New England] filmed everything, they knew what we were running. So [during the timeout] I said, 'Hey, do you guys remember the Sucker Sneak?' They said, 'Yeah.' 'Well, we're gonna run that. Both guards pull; center, you just block the [middle] linebacker; and Kurt, you just get into the end zone.' We

AS PURDY TUCKED THE BALL INTO HIS ARM, PENNEL AND NNADI TURNED AROUND, LOOKING LIKE THE *BURGLARS FROM HOME ALONE*, BURSTING THROUGH A DOOR ONLY TO FIND A CAN OF PAINT SWINGING TOWARD THEIR HEADS.

Chapter 3

A DESPERATION CALL

"THEY ONLY have 10 guys in there!"

The sound of John Madden's voice was interrupted by an official's whistle. The Patriots had just taken a timeout, up 17-3, after making an error on a five-player substitution. The Rams were at the 2-yard line with a little more than nine minutes remaining in Super Bowl XXXVI.

What one believes occurred during this timeout is heavily dependent on how one views recent league history—specifically, the Patriots, who would later become embroiled in a controversy in which the team was found to have videotaped opposing clubs' signals.

St. Louis running back Marshall Faulk would later say he believed his team's final walkthrough of that week was videotaped, which gave New England the ability to stop certain new plays. The *Boston Herald* reported on the taped walkthrough back in 2008, but later had to issue

drew it up on the sideline. We hadn't run it in a long time."

Given that Martz wound up losing the game in heart-breaking fashion, asking him for more detail felt like digging into the director's notes for a certain production of *Our American Cousin*. But Martz has been on the record with his suspicions of practice spying in the past and there was a far greater risk at hand of losing valuable information about the Sucker Sneak—we now had a name!—to the sands of time.

Martz went on to say that, in the huddle, he told both of his guards to present with extra-wide splits from the center, knowing that each of them would be covered by a defensive tackle no matter where they lined up. Belichick, like Spagnuolo and other great defensive minds, had some habits that were predictable. This negated the need to guess whether the Patriots' players would outcharge, because Martz was playing New England's sound defensive assignments against them. An overhead view of the touchdown confirms this, with massive splits between the center and guard on both sides and much narrower splits between the guards and tackles. Still, to be safe, Martz also instructed

both guards to pull to add another distraction for the defensive tackles to contend with.

Warner took the snap and burrowed behind his center, Andy McCollum. Patriots defenders Richard Seymour and Anthony Pleasant both shot forward, with Pleasant getting a hand on Warner's shoulder and Seymour getting an arm around Warner's waist.

"[We ran] that play about a dozen times," Martz says. "And it never failed."

In 2004, Martz ran the play on a fourth-and-1 against the Dolphins from the 15-yard line. As quarterback Marc Bulger took the snap, he started to fall forward but realized that no one was going to stop him, so he stood upright and sprinted into the end zone.

Martz's contributions to the Greatest Show on Turf are significant and were at the time, earth-shattering, given the homogeneity of NFL offensive schemes. Now, he's watching JV teams run his running back bullet pass. And,

oddly enough, he was seated on his couch with the 49ers game on his TV in October when Purdy walked through the Chiefs' defense completely untouched.

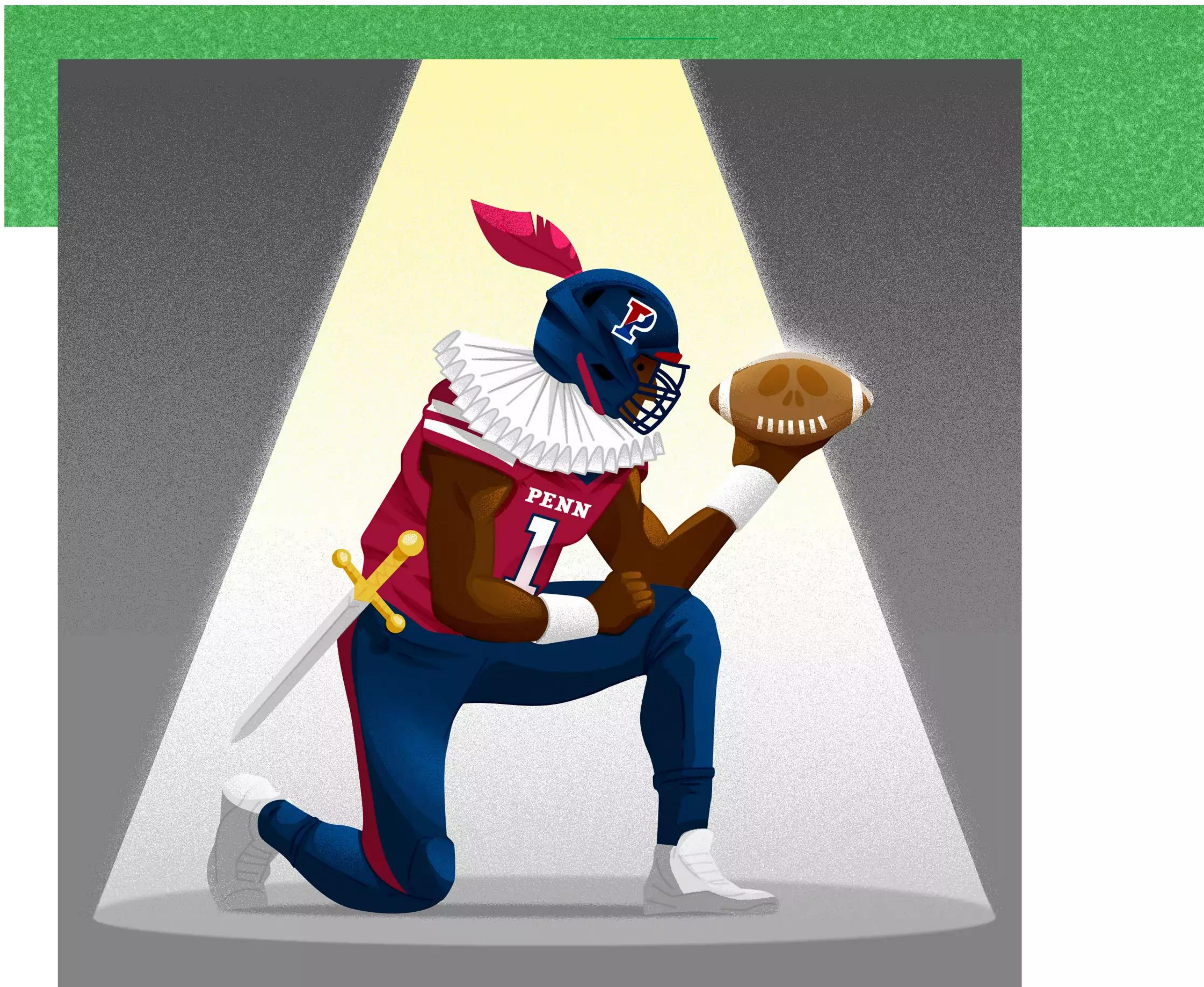
"I watched it live. I laughed," he says. "Said, 'There's a Sucker Sneak. Someone finally did it.'"

Chapter 4

THE SUCKER REDUX

ON THE Tuesday before Penn played heavily favored Harvard in mid-November, Quakers offensive coordinator Greg Chimera found himself with 30 free seconds at the end of a practice period—time to run one more play with nothing else on the script.

Chimera walked over to the offensive line and explained the concept of a play he had seen a few days earlier and couldn't shake: Purdy's walk-in touchdown. The defense



thought Chimera was making a typical adjustment and, as it was providing a scout look for Harvard, was aligned with two defensive tackles meant to read and react to the guards. None of the other coaches knew. The Quakers snapped the ball completely unsure of what would happen and scored on that play, despite having drawn it up on a moment's notice. Throughout the week, even as the defense became acclimated to the call, it kept working.

Chimera now had his pet project baked into the plan. He needed to tailor a few parts of the concept to fit two major issues. One: Penn doesn't run plays from under center, so there is an increased distance between the quarterback and the vacant space he has to run through. Two: Chimera noticed that, in test-run scenarios, the eyes of his defensive tackles went first to reading the pulling guards and second to the running back. There was concern, given the longer distance the quarterback had to travel, that eyes on the running back—situated behind the QB in a pistol-like

and called a running play for Hosley, who had nine rushing TDs on the season and averaged nearly 120 yards per game.

"In my head, I kind of want him to get stopped, because then it's the perfect spot to run the play," Chimera says, laughing.

And after Hosley went down at the 4-yard line, after a cutback inside had him met with a pile of defenders, came Chimera's moment. Inside the booth, there was an atmosphere he'd never felt before, like the place was ready to explode. Quarterback Liam O'Brien clapped his hands, setting in motion the pistol snap. As the ball was flying through the air, Hosley began to dive stage right like a parent who just stepped on a plastic dinosaur. Both of the guards pulled at the same time, taking the Crimson tackles with them, creating a small space in front of O'Brien. The quarterback ran forward as the panicked defensive tackles turned to see the reveal. Penn center William Bergin, who had been in a shoving match in the end zone on the previ-

THERE IS AN EPHEMERAL BEAUTY TO IT. OVER THE COURSE OF FOUR SECONDS, THERE IS SHAKESPEAREAN-LEVEL ACTING AS THE BACK LEAPS INTO THE AIR AND ARTFUL VIOLENCE AS THE CENTER HITS THE LINEBACKER'S RIB CAGE.

formation—would also draw defenders right back to the player holding the ball.

The solution came in the form of sophomore running back Malachi Hosley, the Ivy League's leading rusher and the person most defenders would assume was getting the ball in that situation. "I told him to pretend like you're the punter on a fake punt," says Chimera, who instructed Hosley to take a few steps out like he'd be receiving a pitch and then pretend the ball had skied over his head. "Now, if either of those defensive tackles see what's going on, their eyes go to the window dressing of the running back."

With the tweaks worked out, Chimera says he couldn't contain his excitement during the week. Every Wednesday, the staff DoorDashes Chipotle and sits together watching every trick play they can find from the previous weekend of football, so hitting this would mean something. He told his wife about the potential of scoring on the viral play in a game.

"She didn't know what I was talking about," he says. "She was like, *O.K.! Good luck! Can you do the dishes?*"

He had to wait until the fourth quarter for the right scenario to even consider calling the play, which the coaching staff called "Puppy." The Quakers had the ball first-and-goal

ous play, took on Harvard's middle linebacker and knocked him out of the way. Matt Leon, the play-by-play voice of the Quakers, said over the livestream: "Where's. The. Defense?"

"It was the funniest 10 seconds in the headset all year," Chimera says. "Everyone going nuts at the same time."

Of course, it goes deeper than that, as all good play calls do. For one, Bergin just remade his highlight tape, with the Sucker Sneak front and center. More importantly, Chimera's wife, Allison, confirms that as soon as she saw the play online she thought it was cool and reposted it.

There is an ephemeral beauty to it as well. Over the course of four seconds, there is synchronicity as the two guards begin their pull looking like two sides of the same person escaping a funhouse mirror. Shakespearean-level acting as the back leaps up into the air. Artful violence as the center gets his hands on the linebacker's rib cage. And, of course, the quarterback walking across the goal line like some sort of floating deity above the battlefield. Maybe that's overstating it to some people, but not for me. Not on this play.

Chimera gets it.

"Very rarely, in life or in football, do things work out exactly the way you want them to," he says. "But we were hoping it would look exactly like that." □

MINNESOTA WIN

Despite a lackluster playoff showing, Darnold will be the best signal-caller slated to hit free agency—assuming the Vikes don't use the franchise tag on him.

**CAPOLOGISTS
AND THESE**

TOP

BY
**GILBERTO
MANZANO**
AND
**MATT
VERDERAME**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO

*OF THE WORLD, UNITE! THE OFFSEASON IS UPON US, WHICH MEANS DEALS GALORE.
50 POTENTIAL FREE AGENTS WILL BE THE HOTTEST COMMODITIES ON THE MARKET*







1

TEE HIGGINS Bengals WR

*Projected contract: **Four years, \$120 million***

For the second year in a row, Higgins was limited to 12 games. Though he was beaten up and dealing with multiple injuries, he still had 73 catches for 911 yards and 10 scores. That was an improvement over last season, when he had just 656 yards and five TDs. All the same, Higgins is going to command a large contract based on what he's done throughout his five years with the Bengals, for whom he averaged more than 1,000 yards receiving in his first three seasons. It would be a surprise if the 26-year-old doesn't get an annual salary of at least \$25-30 million despite his recent injury concerns.

MELINDA MEIJER/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

NFL FREE AGENCY

2. **SAM DARNOLD** Vikings QB
Projected contract: Three years, \$110 million

3. **TREY SMITH** Chiefs G
Projected contract: Four years, \$80 million

4. **CHRIS GODWIN** Buccaneers WR
Projected contract: One year, \$15 million

5. **ZACK BAUN** Eagles LB
Projected contract: Three years, \$34 million

6. **BYRON MURPHY JR.** Vikings CB
Projected contract: Two years, \$25 million

7. **JEVON HOLLAND** Dolphins S
Projected contract: Four years, \$60 million

8. **CHARVARIUS WARD** 49ers CB
Projected contract: Three years, \$57 million

9. **RONNIE STANLEY** Ravens OT
Projected contract: Two years, \$40 million

10

Reed never received proper credit for his play with the Jets, which comes with the territory when you're lining up next to Sauce Gardner. As he looks for a payday with a new team, Reed may discover that there is a buyer-beware label attached to him because he had the luxury of playing with Gardner. Reed was relatively effective in 2024 and was PFF's 17th highest-graded corner the prior season, and since he's just 28, a multiyear deal should materialize.

D. J. REED Jets CB

Projected contract: Two years, \$25 million





11. **JOSH SWEAT** Eagles edge
Projected contract: Three years, \$45 million

12. **AMARI COOPER** Bills WR
Projected contract: Two years, \$30 million

13. **HAASON REDDICK** Jets edge
Projected contract: One year, \$10 million

14. **KHALIL MACK** Chargers edge
Projected contract: One year, \$10 million

15. **TALANOA HUFANGA** 49ers S
Projected contract: Two years, \$25 million

16. **CAM ROBINSON** Vikings OT
Projected contract: Three years, \$54 million

17. **STEFON DIGGS** Texans WR
Projected contract: One year, \$15 million

18. **RASUL DOUGLAS** Bills CB
Projected contract: Two years, \$20 million

19. **CHASE YOUNG** Saints DE
Projected contract: Three years, \$30 million

J.K. DOBBINS Chargers RB

Projected contract: Two years, \$14 million

20

Dobbins appeared to be on his way out of the NFL. After a successful rookie year with the Ravens, he tore his ACL before the 2021 season, missed half of '22 with another knee injury and then ruptured his Achilles tendon in '23, limiting him to a grand total of nine games in those three years. Signed by the Chargers on a no-risk deal this past offseason, Dobbins flourished (though an MCL sprain cost him four games). He rushed for 905 yards and nine touchdowns while averaging 4.6 yards per carry, helping L.A. make the playoffs while reestablishing his value as a lead back.

21

DEANDRE HOPKINS Chiefs WR

Projected contract: One year, \$8 million

Hopkins got lost in the Titans' abysmal offense, hitting a low when he had one catch on his only target for minus-two yards against the Bills in Week 7. Three days later he was traded to Kansas City, where he quickly returned to scoring touchdowns. With the Chiefs, Hopkins had 41 receptions for 437 yards and four TDs in 10 regular-season games, showing that even at 32, the three-time first-team All-Pro can still be a threat if he's got a quality quarterback throwing to him. Hopkins might end up being a rental for Kansas City, as he's likely to command a decent deal—probably a one-year contract with incentives.

22. **DRE GREENLAW** 49ers LB
Projected contract: One year, \$11 million

23. **CARLTON DAVIS III** Lions CB
Projected contract: Two years, \$24 million

24. **MALCOLM KOONCE** Raiders edge
Projected contract: One year, \$9 million

25. **AARON JONES SR.** Vikings RB
Projected contract: One year, \$7 million

26. **AZEEZ OJULARI** Giants edge
Projected contract: Two years, \$25 million

27. **NICK BOLTON** Chiefs LB
Projected contract: Three years, \$45 million

28. **KEVIN ZEITLER** Lions G
Projected contract: One year, \$12 million

29. **ZACK MARTIN** Cowboys G
Projected contract: One year, \$12 million

30. **ASANTE SAMUEL JR.** Chargers CB
Projected contract: Two years, \$20 million

31. **RUSSELL WILSON** Steelers QB
Projected contract: One year, \$20 million

32. **JUSTIN FIELDS** Steelers QB
Projected contract: One year, \$10 million

33. **MIKE HILTON** Bengals CB
Projected contract: One year, \$9 million

34. **JUSTIN SIMMONS** Falcons S
Projected contract: One year, \$8 million

35. **MARQUISE BROWN** Chiefs WR
Projected contract: One year, \$7 million

36. **BOBBY WAGNER** Commanders LB
Projected contract: One year, \$6 million

37. **JUSTIN REID** Chiefs S
Projected contract: Two years, \$24 million

38. **RYAN KELLY** Colts C
Projected contract: One year, \$10 million

39. **ALARIC JACKSON** Rams OT
Projected contract: Two years, \$35 million

40. **DARIUS SLAYTON** Giants WR
Projected contract: Two years, \$24 million

41. **MATTHEW JUDON** Falcons edge
Projected contract: One year, \$7.5 million

42. **NAJEE HARRIS** Steelers RB
Projected contract: One year, \$5 million



43. **KEENAN ALLEN** Bears WR
Projected contract: One year, \$11 million

44. **CAMRYN BYNUM** Vikings S
Projected contract: Two years, \$22 million

45. **DeMARCUS LAWRENCE** Cowboys DE
Projected contract: One year, \$5 million

46. **LAVONTE DAVID** Buccaneers LB
Projected contract: One year, \$5.5 million

47. **WILL FRIES** Colts G
Projected contract: Two years, \$20 million

48. **ROBERT SPILLANE** Raiders LB
Projected contract: One year, \$6 million

49. **TERSRAWN WHARTON** Chiefs DT
Projected contract: Two years, \$12 million



MEKHI BECTON Eagles G

Projected contract: Two years, \$25 million

50

Taken by the Jets as a tackle in the first round of the 2020 draft, Becton found a home as the starting right guard for the Eagles in '24. Heading into the season, Becton—who missed nearly two full seasons with New York before signing a one-year deal with Philly—was viewed as the weak link on an otherwise stout offensive line. But he ended up being a reliable contributor, starting 15 games and helping open up running lanes for 2,000-yard rusher Saquon Barkley. At 25, he's still young and considering both his pedigree and his play this past year, look for him to garner significant interest.



By
**JACK
McCALLUM**

SOCIAL CLIMBER

Photographs by
**ERICK W.
RASCO**





If you're a sports fan who scrolls, you've probably laughed at a video created by Nick Cassano—aka **NICKY CASS** to his millions of followers. Here's how a former college baseball player with a gift for comedy turned a little lo-fi backyard fun into massive online fame



NICK CASSANO

who is 24 and looks no older, stuffs an off-white blanket (always the same one due to its “aerodynamical soundness”) under his white T-shirt, clips on a small microphone, moves his eyeglasses to the end of his nose, and miraculously transforms himself into a middle-aged, pot-bellied, overcaffeinated recreation-league basketball coach.

Many have endured/enjoyed some version of this guy that Cassano frequently calls “Coach Al”—old-school to the breadth and depth of his substantial gut, never met a coaching cliché he hasn’t adopted as gospel—and Cassano has given him viral life in hundreds of videos that have turned the Nyack (N.Y.) High product into a social media phenomenon known to his millions of followers as Nicky Cass.

“There’s not really one Coach Al,” Cassano says during a recent interview at a CYO gym, a perfect spot to watch Cassano’s creation rant and rave about the fundamental deficiencies of his invisible charges. “The closest is this old-school guy from the Bronx named Al Ortiz, who used

to be my baseball hitting coach. His instructions about batting were always accompanied by life lessons.”

Cassano’s characters offer life lessons, too, most of them centered around some iteration of *you’re lollygagging*. Which cannot be said of Cassano. He works hard and endlessly (his video cache numbers more than 400) and has the results to prove it—a combined 3.4 million followers on Instagram and TikTok and approaching 200,000 subscribers to his YouTube channel. He has thrown a ceremonial first pitch at a Mets game; been playfully dissed by Derek Jeter as part of a Coach Al video filmed at Yankee Stadium; advised Diamondbacks pitchers to “imagine you’re covered in pink feathers like a flamingo” during an invited visit to spring training; gotten his own Topps baseball card (“surreal”); and hugged Lord Stanley’s cup in his backyard.

Not bad for a kid who started what has become a career with a 15-second I’m-bored-so-I’ll-make-a-video clip about the differences between an Italian father and a non-Italian father reacting to a son who plans to go out. “It was a Wednesday in January of 2020, 7:52 p.m., when the video went out,” says Cassano, whose life-changing moment is certified by a TikTok date stamp, “and when I woke up in the morning it had, like, two million views. I freaked out. I deleted the app.” But eventually he undeleted it—the pandemic came along, and he had nothing better to

do—and started to take content creation seriously.

Cassano isn’t the only one creating in what might be called the sports-goof space. “Hilarious,” he proclaims the work of Scott Bergin, who specializes in insulting Little Leaguers with comments like *Have you ever thought you might actually be left-handed?* when he takes a righty pitcher out of the game. “But I don’t see myself in competition with anybody.”

Cassano’s root character is not always a coach. He’s more an archetypal male authority figure, invariably Italian with touches of New Yawk and Joisy (he attended Montclair State, where he played second base for a year before transferring



to SUNY New Paltz) burned in. Yes, that guy can manifest as Coach Al, who hits earth-scorching ground balls to terrified young infielders we don't see, or as Coach Martarelli, who announces that the first night of youth-league hoops practice will be spent entirely on assuming the "triple-threat position." But he can also be the bagel shop owner who's incredulous that a customer orders an egg-white omelet and avocado on a whole wheat ("Ya want me to throw it in da juicer, too? Hey, just kiddin'"); the deli shop proprietor whose specialties include a sandwich known as "Mikey B's Anus"; or the Italian restaurant owner whose secret to his "OMG roast chicken" is to leave it out in the rain "so all da beautiful particles from this planet Earth go into da chicken skin and it soak it up."

Cassano most assuredly has a gift for spontaneous theatricality, but the character is also *inside* of him, constructed from the raw materials of an Italian family. "I'm not *literally* in any of the videos," says Cassano's father, Eric, who handles the ever-burgeoning business of Nicky Cass Media, "but it's a great debate as to whether I'm actually *in* them." Uncle Mario (his mother's uncle who "wouldn't want his last name used") is somewhere in the video mix because, though nobody knew it at the time, he kick-started Cassano's

video career. His parents were astonished when a 3-year-old Nicky spontaneously did a spot-on impression of Uncle Mario. "I don't know if Uncle Mario is flattered," says Cassano, "but now he's like, 'Where's my percentage?'"

The key to the essential Cass character, this in-your-face dispenser of mostly useless stratagems, is that he's not entirely buffoon or bully. True, he's not the guy you necessarily want to play for, but he might be the guy you'd call at 3 a.m. when you have a flat...even knowing you'd never hear the end of it.

NOTHING DONE WELL IS as easy as it looks, of course, but Cassano lives what seems to be the Platonic ideal of a 24-year-old male's working life. He makes his own schedule, generally filming on Mondays and filling up the other days with post-production, promotion and marketing. He works in

CLIP ARTIST

A few years after posting videos out of pandemic boredom, Cassano (left, with his friend and chief of staff, Jon Cox) now sits at the center of a booming media business.





jeans and T-shirt most of the time. Many of his videos are filmed at his parents' Rockland County home. They support him wholeheartedly. "My mom [Rosalie] laughs at everything I do and thinks I look like Brad Pitt," he says. His coworkers are friends; with him on this day at the CYO gym are Perry Quartuccio (aka the Flash, a former Montclair State teammate) and Pat Peterson, who helped him secure the gym. He's his own boss. He works quickly and spontaneously, and he enjoys his own stuff. A lot. "I'm not trying to be cocky," he says, "but I just think it's freakin' funny."

Watching Cassano at work is not to witness the Stanislavski method; he's scriptless, like Robin Williams, grabbing ideas out of the ether. True, he's not being asked to deliver soliloquies from Beckett, but keeping up the energy is mandatory, and that's not a problem for Cass.

On this day the challenge is to get two or three social-media-quality videos in an hour's time, all with the familiar old-school coach character. (He will end up with five.)

"O.K., what kinds of things would this guy say?" says the 5'7" Cassano, pacing around the gym, blanket and glasses in place, looking every bit the fired-up coach ready to impart knowledge. Quartuccio and Peterson are free to answer,

an empty set of bleachers. "John, John, let me do da coaching, O.K.?"

Most of his "performances" require only one take, although he does repeat a falling-down-while-taking-a-charge maneuver. "Hey, I'm 57 years old and I can do it!" he shouts to his unseen team. At which point he does seem 57 years old.

Never is his unerring sense of the precise line better illustrated than when he asks for help on what play a coach might holler from the sideline. "Triangle" and "Four Out" are some of the ideas, but Cass instantly conjures up something better. "Seton Hall! Seton Hall!" he screams, the *Hall* coming out like *Hawl*. It's perfect.

After each take, he goes to Quartuccio's side, takes a quick glance at the playback and laughs heartily. "That's so good," he says after one. "Perfect," he says after another. Which are comments Coach Al would never make. "If we don't laugh at it," says Cassano, "we don't post it."

CASSANO WAS NOT THE kid who participated in the school drama club or went to theater camp. He's had no formal training in front of a camera and has no plans to get any. Predictably, he was "the class-clown type," trying to make the girls laugh

Cassano has a following in the millions, but his **MOST IMPORTANT AUDIENCE** is the small crew of friends he creates content with. "If we don't laugh at it," he says, "we don't post it."

as are two visitors to the "set", but it's not a question as much as it is Cass lighting the fuse for his inspired improv.

"Defense wins championships!" he suddenly yells in his coach voice.

"I see anyone jackin' up threes they're going to be in trouble!"

"I don't want none-a-yiz doggin' it!"

He will eventually work those lines into finished takes, along with old reliable players names such as Spadini, Cinquecento, Bellofonte and especially Gagliano, the most recurring.

He signals to Quartuccio—his cell-phone cameraman whose own surname sounds like it could be a Cassano creation—that he's ready to go. He's decided to riff on what a rec coach would say when he hears criticism from the crowd. He gathers an imaginary team around him on the bench, starts drawing up plays and suddenly looks into

("I did it so well that most of the time I became their friend instead of their boyfriend") and entertaining his baseball teammates on bus trips by making fun of the coaches. He was working as a personal trainer when he posted that fateful first video and was able to become a full-time creator in May 2022. He makes a comfortable living (he won't specify how comfortable) on personal appearances, merchandise sales, sponsorship collaborations with among others, Major League Baseball and the NHL, and a consulting business.

Cassano doesn't spend a lot of time thinking about *demographics* and *target audiences*. The quintessential in-your-face rec-league coach is probably more familiar to an older demo (hand raised) that doesn't much plug into social media. "But funny is funny," says Cassano. True that. Even if you don't understand pump faking or boxing out or protecting your dribble, you can see the humor in a man so intent on selling those techniques that he looks like he's in the throes of a



MAKING THE SHOW

Last August Cassano branched out from his backyard productions and brought Coach Al to Yankee Stadium to throw out a first pitch.

including the one about Frankie Lip, who was destined for greatness, the sober-voiced documentarian says, because “he pushed a football across the living room floor with his head before he could walk.” When a shortstop demonstrates the correct way to get off a throw quickly, he does so with a glove made for a Little Leaguer. In a video about an NFL challenge play, the camera focuses in on a football that is clearly deflated. The same formula applies to the non-sports content. The pizza shop owner twirling dough? He’s clearly using a towel, which happens to be a monogrammed anniversary gift given to his parents.

So there’s a delightful tone to the whole thing: A character who takes things *way* too seriously being conveyed in a manner that says *you* shouldn’t take it too seriously. The audience is in on the joke. At times he’s even a neighbor *watching* from the window as next-door Nicky makes a Nicky Cass video “Hey, Diane,” Cassano-as-neighbor says as he watches Cassano-as-umpire do a routine outside, “just when you think it can’t get any crazier, he does this s---.” The third wall has never been up in a Nicky Cass video.

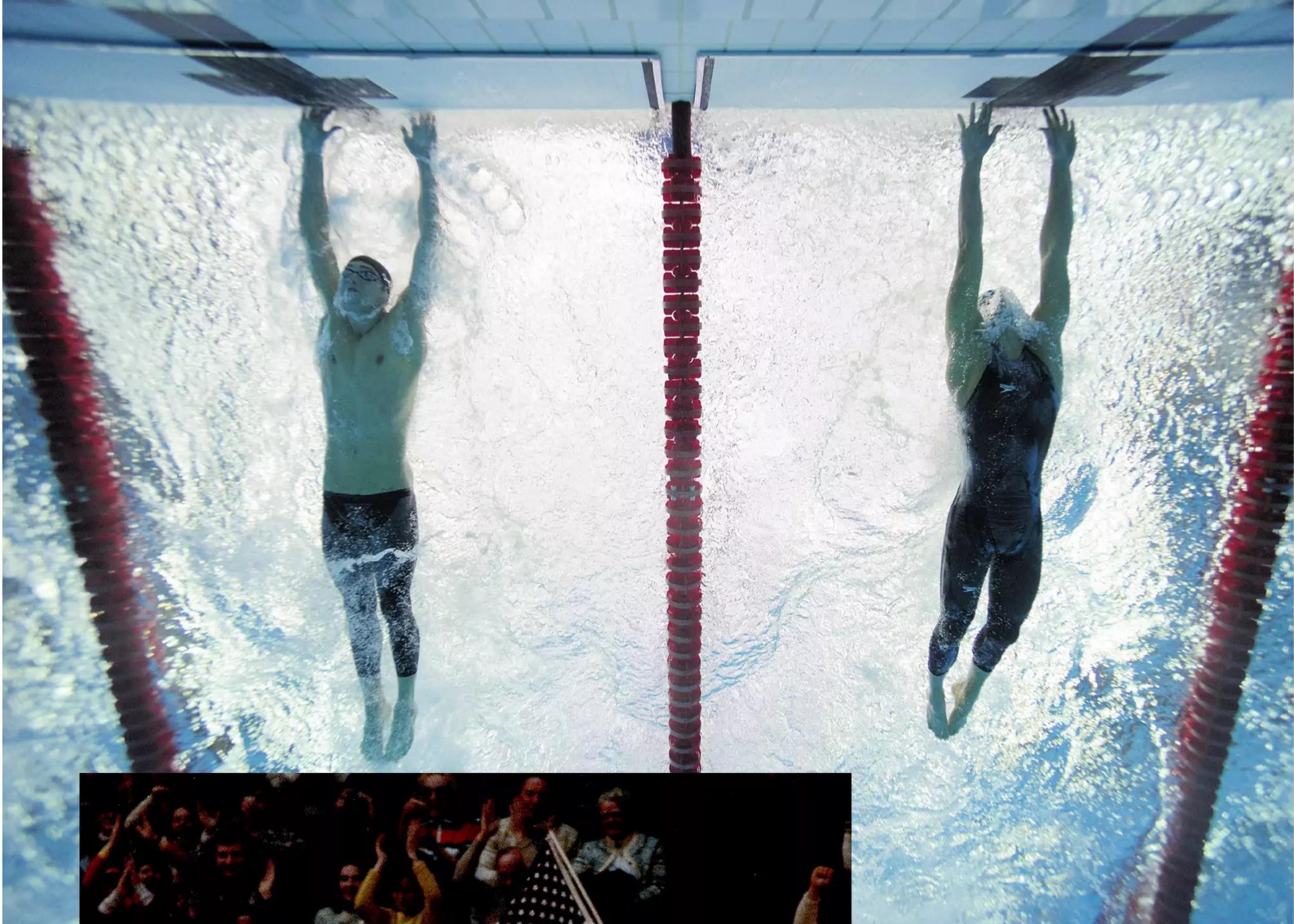
Sitcoms have been launched on thinner material than the characters Cass has sent out so far, but at this point he has no plans to move away from his self-made videos, find a partner to expand content possibilities or hunt down a TV agent. If he does transition from content creation, it will be toward self-help, he says, “taking the stuff I’ve learned about how to create, grow on social media and helping people monetize and capitalize on their talents.”

So, don’t look for any new characters to drift onto the Cass baseball diamond or into the pizza shop. “I get ideas DMed to me all the time,” Cassano says. “but, selfishly, I’m just not that open to it right now. I want to be the one leading the creative. I like my own cocoon. And at this point I’m not worrying about ideas. I have a saying that I’ll never force a vibe because it’s an easy way to kill it, and, so far, getting ideas hasn’t been a problem.”

So, at least for the immediate future, Coach Al will be around, and he absolutely does *not* want to see you doggin’ it. □

neurological disease when he demonstrates them. It’s better seen than described, of course, but his videos come most alive when he suddenly explodes into a spasm of energy, as when his football coach, muttering to himself as he paces the “sideline” (Eric and Rosalie’s backyard), suddenly sprints toward an imaginary referee like a man escaping a fire. “TIMEOUT! TIMEOUT!” he yells frantically, slamming his right palm against his left index finger.

The DIY nature of his videos adds to their charm. Cass’s football players sometimes wear Birkenstocks. “I wanted the audience to say, ‘Wait a minute, he’s doing this crap in sandals and socks?’” says Cass. “That’s the feel I wanted.” The coach delivers an inspired halftime speech to his team with flowerpots and a TV dish in the background like a family barbecue is about to break out. The Premier League player walks out holding an actual doll instead of a child’s hand. Lawn and leaf bags play a primary role in several videos,



COURTESY OF KLUETMEIER FAMILY



PICTURE

Underwater?
Fine. Frozen
water? Got it.
No matter the
circumstances,

**HEINZ
KLUETMEIER**

had the
necessary
tools—not
limited
to charm,
fortitude and
an amazing
eye—at his
disposal to
capture the
moment

by
L. JON WERTHEIM

Photographs by
**HEINZ
KLUETMEIER**

PERFECT

**YOU'VE HEARD THE LINE
ABOUT MUSIC CRITICISM.
HOW WRITING ABOUT
MUSIC IS LIKE DANCING
ABOUT ARCHITECTURE.
THERE'S SOMETHING
SIMILAR ABOUT TRYING
TO USE WORDS TO
CAPTURE A MAN WHO
HAD MASTERED THE
ART, THE HEFT AND THE
WEIGHT OF THE IMAGE.**

Heinz Kluetmeier, who died on Jan. 14 at the age of 82 due to complications with Parkinson's disease and a stroke, didn't take photos, he gave photos. Putting into the public domain visual gems that told stories, evoked feelings, memorialized events and sometimes, literally, reset limits of possibility.

Kluetmeier was born in Berlin and spent his early years in Bremen, but at age 9, moved to the guts of America... to Milwaukee. He even attended a high school named for George Custer. Just as he spoke two languages and toggled between two cultures, Heinz was both an athlete and an

aesthete. He captained the school's tennis team and was a varsity swimmer. When he wasn't the subject of sports photos, he was fashioning them himself. At the ripe age of 15, he was on the sidelines, shooting Packers games. Still a teenager, he found creative positions in convention halls, shooting the 1960 presidential campaign.

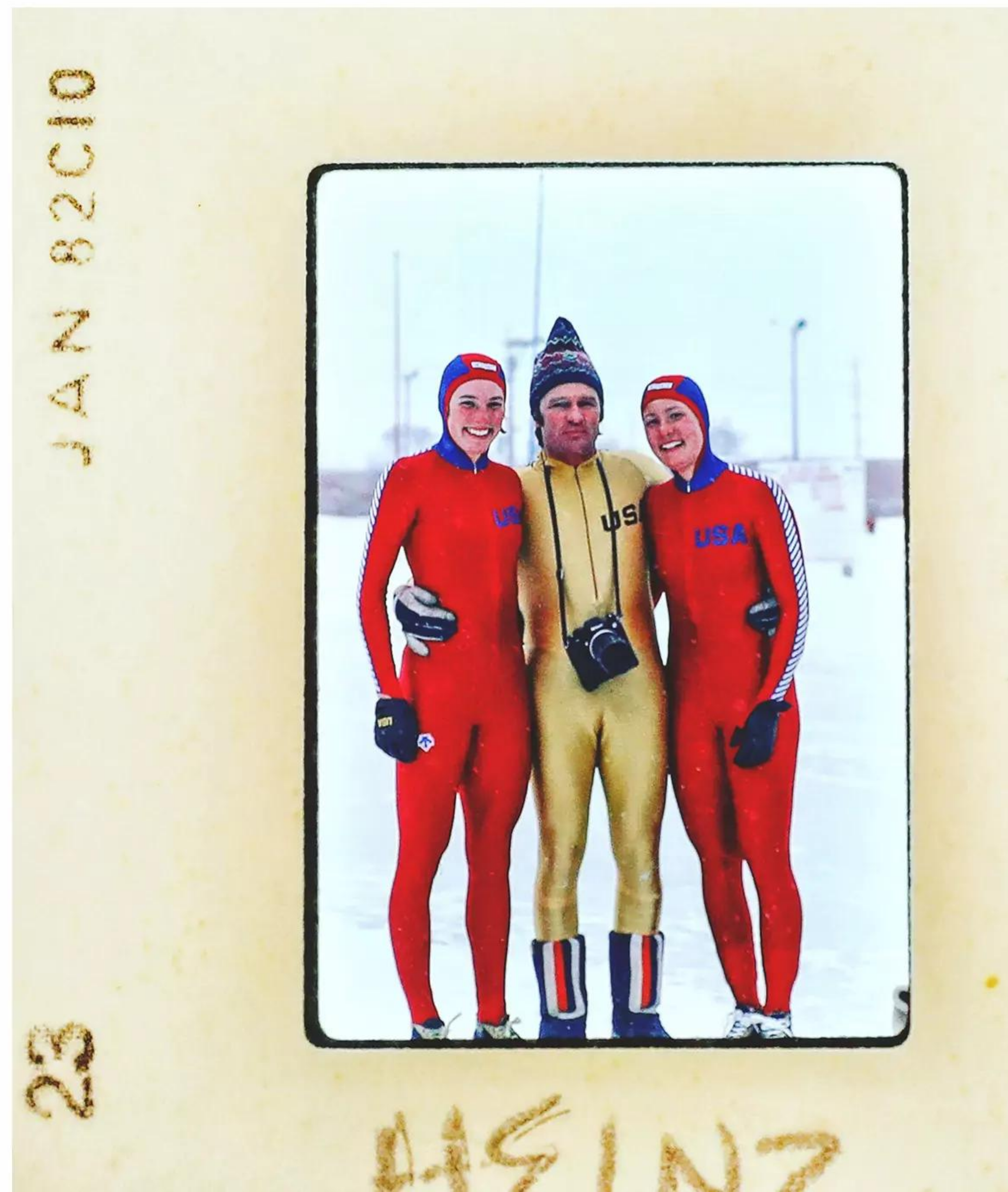
There are no hard, fast rules about making it in America. But when you have a portfolio featuring Vince Lombardi and John F. Kennedy before you're old enough to drink one of Milwaukee's Finest, you've done well finding a sense of place.

Because he needed still another sector to conquer, Kluetmeier attended Dartmouth as an engineering major. This was at the behest of his father, skeptical, as he was, that photography could double as a career. Heinz graduated from Dartmouth in 1965 and worked for two years at Inland Steel. But he could never shake photography—the shutter bug, as it were.

After freelancing for the Associated Press, Heinz joined the staff of the *Milwaukee Journal*. In 1969, before he had turned 30, he was poached by Time Inc. to work as a photographer for *Life* and *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*. Kluetmeier returned to Germany in 1972 to cover the Munich Olympics. He was eating with swimmer Mark Spitz during the terrorist attack. He got up—no doubt paying the check first—grabbed his gear, and went to work. And his images from those tragic games would endure.

BLENDING IN

Kluetmeier shot from the sideline to capture Walter Payton in 1984 (far right) but wasn't afraid to get in the trenches with his subjects.





X 2530672
X 264671

More happily, in 1980, Kluetmeier was both at the side of the rink and in the rafters—this was not someone who was ever satisfied sticking to one position—shooting the Miracle on Ice, the Americans’ dramatic upset of the Soviets in that Lake Placid hockey game. The cover of SI featured his handiwork, but no headline or caption, because as he put it, “It didn’t need any window dressing. Everyone in America knew what had happened.”

Kluetmeier took photos that no one even thought to take—much less were able to execute. He would find an angle no one had conceived. He would seize on a detail no one else would notice. Writers loved to work with him, yes, for his companionship and his dexterity. But also because Heinz would develop a rapport with the athlete and uncover a detail that would make its way into the written story. And the Legend of Kluetmeier extended to the way he transferred his images. Today it’s a few keystrokes. In the 1970s and ’80s, he would sometimes transport his film back to the office himself, a pilot license being another of his achievements.

Trained engineer that he was, Heinz had a knack for marrying art with science. He had a photographer’s feel, a sixth sense for getting the shot. But he also mastered technology and the mechanics of the setup. He was the first to experiment with an underwater camera at an international competition, during the 1991 world swimming championships in Perth.

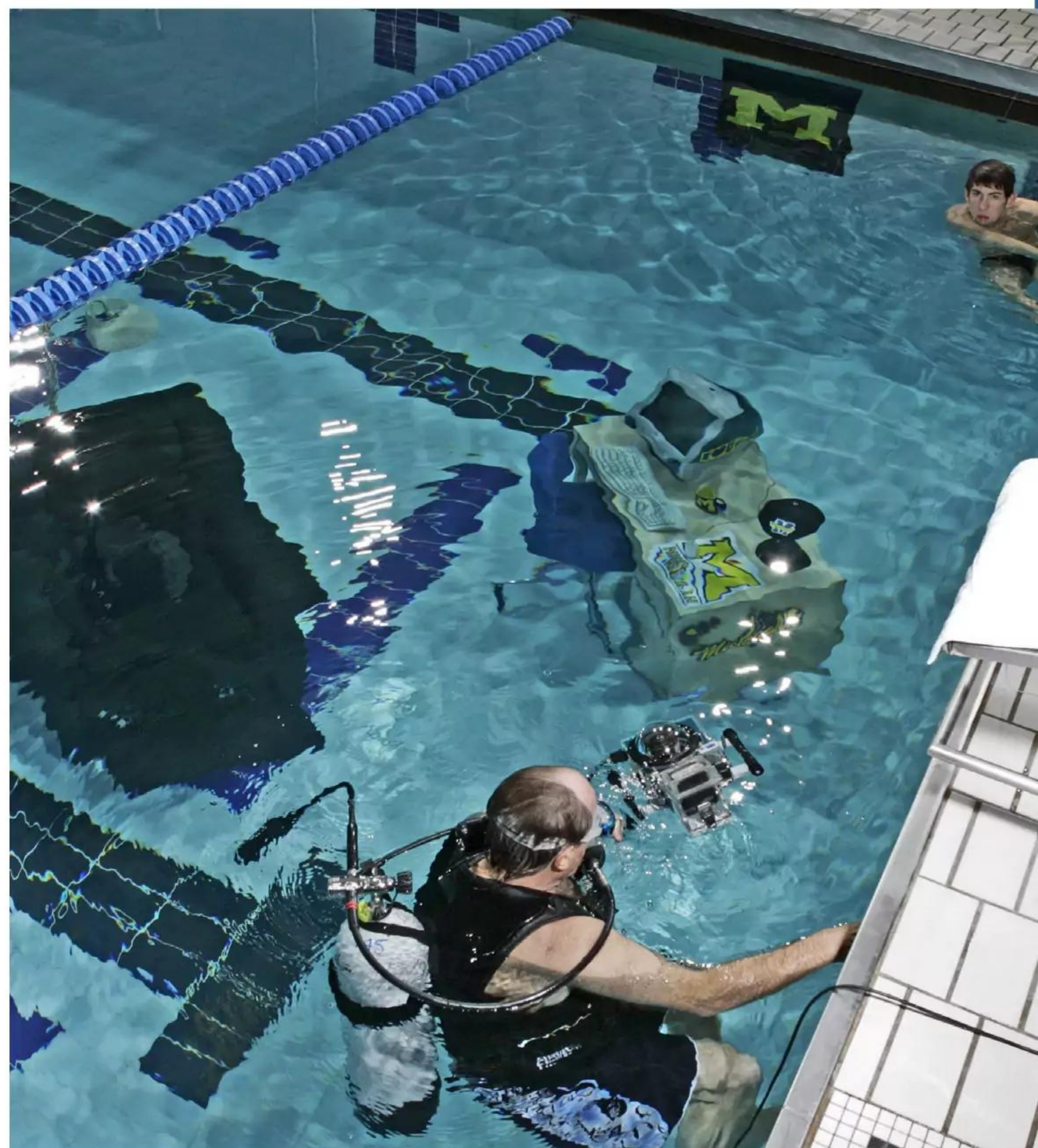
The next year, he became the first photographer to place a camera underwater to capture an Olympic swimming event, in Barcelona. Kluetmeier might be best known for an underwater photo at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, his image confirming that Michael Phelps won the 100-meter butterfly by .01 seconds. Everyone remembers technology; what gets lost in the retelling: It was a technically perfect photo.

That wasn’t even Kluetmeier’s favorite Phelps photo. That would be the shot that Heinz—who was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 2017, the first photographer ever to be so honored—took when Phelps was still a student at Michigan, depicting the swimmer floating near his dorm room desk, which Heinz had purchased at a local Goodwill store for the shoot. The image was created for the cover of the little-seen and now-defunct SI ON CAMPUS, a reminder that Heinz was happy to pursue any subject—from a Super Bowl down to a random motocross race—for any medium, so long as there was a compelling story to be captured.

Kluetmeier had a magic eye, able to capture moments and nuances that eluded even the best of his colleagues. He had a silver tongue, no less a word than *charming* would describe an interaction with him. He also had a winning set of ears. At dinner, at meetings and in social gatherings, he would tell the jokes and dictate the terms, but he also listened. He listened to friends and reacted accordingly. He listened to subjects and managed to convey what they

INTERIOR DECOR

Kluetmeier visited a Goodwill store in Ann Arbor to build Phelps an underwater dorm room, then donned a scuba tank to capture the image.



said into the photos he would then take. He listened to coworkers and addressed their concerns, often much later down the line.

For so much of his life, Kluetmeier had the stout body of an athlete. And the fearlessness, too, which enabled him to take so many physical risks and candidly, add a layer of sad irony to his latter years, when a stroke robbed him of all that physicality.

Let’s be clear: Heinz could be fierce. Woe to the security guard or self-important usher who tried to displace him. Woe to whoever was in his way when he tried to get a shot—at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, Kluetmeier nearly plowed over the high jumper Dwight Stones while trying to get across the infield and take a photo of Mary Decker after



THE PHELPS PHOTO, FOR A LITTLE-SEEN PUBLICATION, WAS A REMINDER THAT HEINZ WAS HAPPY TO PURSUE ANY SUBJECT SO LONG AS THERE WAS A COMPELLING STORY TO BE CAPTURED.

she'd been inadvertently tripped by Zola Budd. Woe to the fellow photographer who encroached on his position while shooting. At the '72 Games, Heinz had a run-in with—no joke—Leni Riefenstahl when she was too aggressive with her space. Woe to the SI editor who disagreed with him on a point in which he felt certain. Which was most points.

But Kluetmeier, who served two stints as SI's director of photography, leavened hard with soft. If he was opinionated, he was also open-minded. He came back to the SI offices after taking a portrait of Caitlyn Jenner in the spring of 2016. She was "as sweet a woman as he was a man," he said shrugging.

Heinz was wonderful company—no matter the context, no matter the hours. He didn't just know the best places

to eat (and drink) the world over; he didn't just know the owner and maître d'. He remembered some detail about them that made them all feel special.

Likewise, Heinz didn't offer to take portraits of staffers and their families in his loft; he demanded it. He didn't offer guidance and mentorship; he actively foisted it on those lucky enough to be in his orbit.

It's still difficult to reconcile that someone so full of life is no longer with us. But his work lives on, thousands of words for thousands of images. And up there, someone is telling angels how to use a Nikon D4, how to angle for the best images, how to get the film back to the office without getting on a commercial flight... and all the while, he is smiling generously. □

POINT AFTER

RULES MATTER

JORDAN CHILES SHOULD KEEP HER DISPUTED MEDAL. HERE'S WHY

► BY PETER CARLISLE



AT THE Paris Olympics in August, Jordan Chiles finished third in the women's gymnastics floor exercise final after Team USA coach Cecile Landi filed an inquiry challenging the scoring of her routine. International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) officials conducted a review, confirmed an error in the judging, and raised Chiles's score, boosting her from fifth to the bronze medal position (and displacing Ana Barbosu of Romania). Five days later, after Chiles had returned home to a hero's welcome, she learned it was all a big mistake.

Unbeknownst to Chiles, on the day after the competition the Romanian Gymnastics Federation appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), alleging the U.S. inquiry had been submitted after a one-minute time frame referenced in FIG rules. News reports focused on whether video evidence could establish the precise timing of the inquiry—overlooking the fact that timeliness had no bearing on the validity of FIG's decision.

The only support for what CAS refers to in its ruling as the “mandatory one-minute rule” is a provision in FIG's rules allowing a coach to submit an inquiry

for the final gymnast of a rotation provided it is initiated verbally within one minute of the gymnast's score being shown. The CAS panel inferred that such language imposes a strict deadline and requires the dismissal of late verbal inquiries.

But this interpretation contradicts FIG's rules, which provide that the discretion of the Superior Jury—the group of officials that rules on inquiries during a competition—trumps the timeliness of verbal inquiries. While officials may dismiss those lodged beyond the one-minute time frame, they are not required to do so. Moreover, a strictly enforced deadline conflicts with numerous other rules and would frustrate FIG's fundamental purpose of accurately scoring gymnasts' performances.

References in the rules to time frames are intended to ensure the inquiry process aligns with the strict time limits for athletes to begin their routines, since it can take several minutes for the Superior Jury to conduct a review. This is not a concern for inquiries involving the last gymnast of a rotation—which Chiles was. As CAS acknowledged in its ruling, the aim of the time frame is to ensure “a prompt closure and

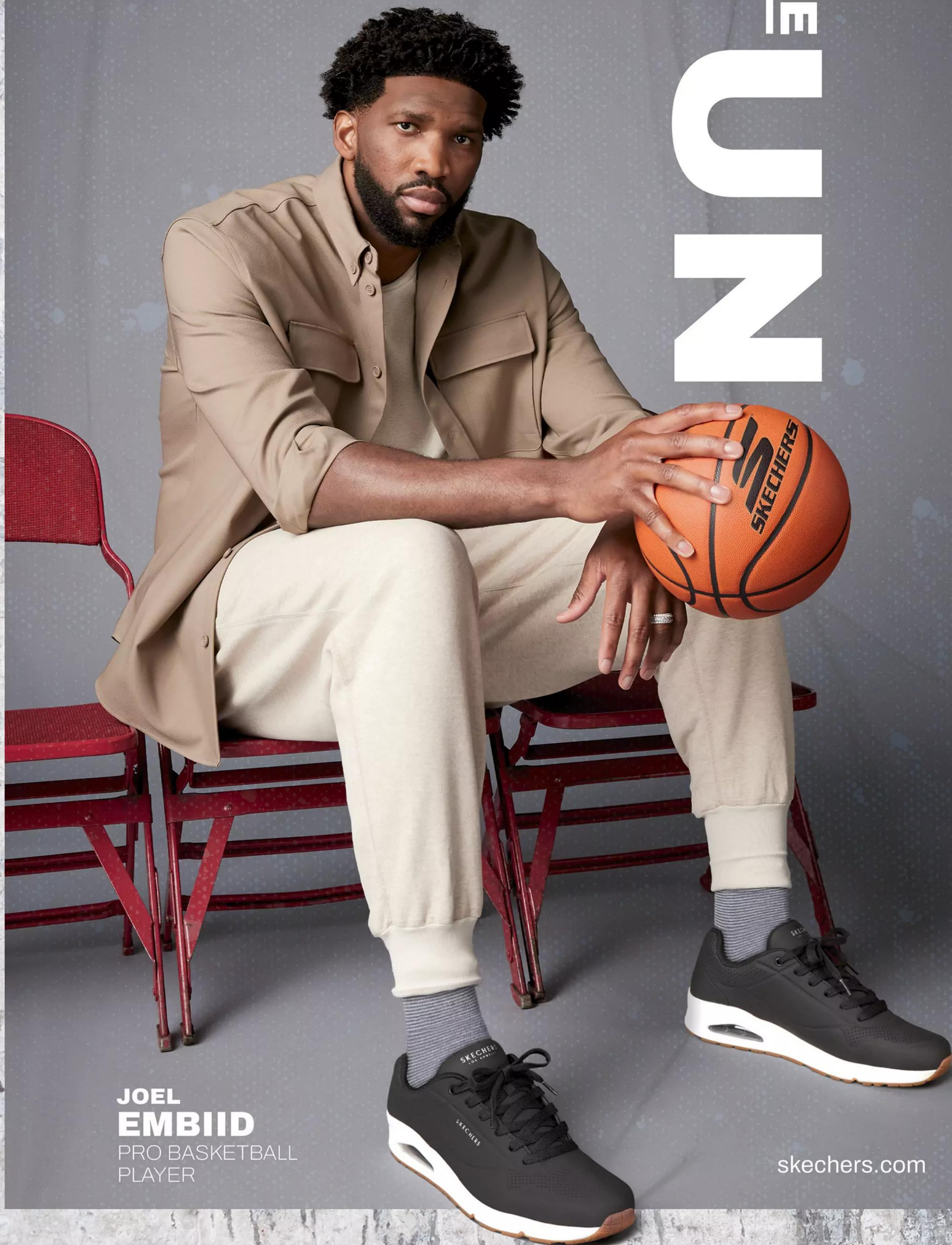
finality of the competition, to avoid a situation of extended uncertainty as to who may have finished in what order.” However, CAS failed to recognize that the timing of the verbal inquiry is only one factor in determining the duration of the inquiry process, since coaches have an additional four minutes to confirm the inquiry in writing. Even if Chiles's verbal inquiry was submitted four seconds late, it did not delay the closure of the competition since her coach filed the written component of the inquiry immediately after—well within the five-minute time frame.

There is no valid basis for its conclusion that the Superior Jury's discretion is subject to a “mandatory one-minute rule.” The Superior Jury was properly authorized to determine the scoring results exactly as it did, and FIG rules state that its decision is final and unappealable. By imposing an unfounded interpretation of FIG's rules, CAS has undermined the integrity of the adjudication process. This decision not only stripped an Olympian of her rightful medal but also sets a dangerous precedent, eroding trust in the arbitration process and the fundamental fairness of Olympic competition. This decision diminishes athletes' confidence that their performances will be judged accurately and fairly, even after the competition concludes. In September, Chiles filed an appeal to the Swiss Federal Supreme Court and she is awaiting a ruling. □

Peter Carlisle is the managing director of Octagon's Olympics and Action Sports Division and has represented Olympic athletes for more than 25 years. He does not represent Jordan Chiles.

SKECHERS®

THE C Z



**JOEL
EMBIID**
PRO BASKETBALL
PLAYER

[skechers.com](https://www.skechers.com)

2024 **SPORTSPERSON**
of the **YEAR** **Sports Illustrated**

PRESENTED BY

A FEELA

Sony Honda Mobility



AFEELA 1 Signature model shown. Features, options and displays subject to change. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED is a registered trademark of ABG-SI, LLC. Used under license.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH SPORTS INSIDE THE AFEELA 1

Sports move with you in the AFEELA 1. Customize the panoramic screen, exterior media bar, and ambient lighting to show off your team pride and redefine how you flaunt your fandom.

RESERVE YOURS NOW | www.shm-afeela.com | @shmafeela

